A case study on how change towards sustainability is produced in organizational narratives

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ABSTRACT

Lately, more and more businesses are putting in efforts to become sustainable. In order to become sustainable, a transformation in the organizational identity is needed in which sustainability becomes a fundamental, indispensable part of the organizational identity. Organizational identities can develop trough organizational narratives because narratives can help organizational members to accept future changes and thus facilitate change. So, when companies want to become more sustainable and get an aligned sustainable organizational identity, organizational sustainability narratives might be the solution. There is limited research on organizational sustainability narratives and how these narratives might influence the organizational identity. That is why this study aims to find answers to the following research question: *"How is change towards sustainability produced in organizational narratives?"'* A case study approach has been adopted on a Dutch international manufacturer of household goods. The last decade sustainability has become of bigger importance to the company and became part of their strategy. The results show four pillars that the organizational sustainability narrative rests on, namely: (a) external evidence, (b) internal evidence, (c) intrinsic motivational talk, (d) concrete sustainability action. In the final phase of the analysis, change promoting narrative elements related to each pillar were distinguished from the more stable expressions of the narrative. The change towards more a sustainability-oriented organization was produced through three main narrative tactics: harnessing key identity elements for a new purpose, authoring a 'higher' organizational purpose, and making it tangible. Interestingly, even though almost all members supported the new sustainability beliefs, promoting it on an organizational level met also with resistance, due to different interpretations of the meaning of the organizational narrative. This study contributes to the studies of organizational narratives, sustainability in organizations and organizational identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses are increasingly employing sustainable practices, aiming to improve environmental and social responsibility while maintaining and improving profitability. Companies are increasingly managing and reporting sustainability practices. In 2008, out of the 250 largest companies worldwide 79 % had issued reports that focused on sustainability or social responsibility performance (as cited by Thomas & Lam, 2012). Numerous of other surveys among corporate practitioners reveal that sustainability issues are of increasing importance for companies all over the world (e.g., Kiron et al. 2013; Schaltegger et al. 2017). So, more and more businesses are putting in efforts to become sustainable. This mainly because the pressure for businesses to respond to sustainability concerns as part of their focus is increasing. Customers increasingly expect businesses to consider human rights in their employment practices and to demonstrate stewardship toward the natural environment (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). Businesses are also exposed to a growing pressure from stakeholders to 'do the right thing' and to be seen as legitimate (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Glavas & Godwin, 2013; Joyce & Panquin, 2016). Consequently, businesses have demonstrated a variety of responses to the discourse of climate change. Some companies have actively lobbied and campaigned against the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions, promoting counter-discourses of climate change denial (Dunlap & McCright, 2011). The emergence of climate change and aligned discourses of 'corporate sustainability' (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002) has also led to the formation of new roles within corporations, such as sustainability managers and consultants, who are charged with making their corporations 'sustainable' and 'good'. Lastly, others have sought to accommodate themselves within a changing regulatory and economic context by reassessing their strategies, investing in new technologies, and branding themselves as 'green' organizations (Kolk & Pinkse, 2005; Levy & Egan, 2003; Orsato, 2009). This kind of change towards sustainability, in which organizations rebrand themselves is the change that the rest of this research will focus on.

It is important to get the support of all employees in order for a company to change the strategies from the traditional ones towards a more sustainable strategy. This because support of employees is highly determinative for the successful introduction of new strategies, structures and processes (Herscovitch & Meyer 2002; Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Lines 2004). A transformation in the organizational identity is needed in which sustainability becomes a fundamental, indispensable part of the organizational identity to get all the employees to support the change (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). An organizational identity can influence the actions of the employees so that they will have a positive attitude towards the change. When for example environmental considerations become an integral part of the organizational identity, it is more difficult to ignore environmental issues within an organization such that they may be legitimated as an integral part of organizational identity (Sharma et al., 1999; Chang & Chen, 2013). So, a profound change in the organizational identity is necessary in which sustainability becomes a fundamental indispensable part. A way in which organizational identities can develop is trough organizational narratives. Narratives as sources of change are currently a popular research field (Vaara et al., 2016). Organizational narratives can help organizational members to accept future changes and thus can facilitate change within the organization and its identity (e.g. Pondy, 1983; Chreim, 2005; Bartel & Garud, 2009). By using narratives, organizational members are able to reconstruct organizational identities and therefor also the purpose of an organization (Chreim, 2007).

So, a way in which sustainability-focused identities and business models can develop is possibly trough organizational sustainability narratives. However, due to that sustainability management is still a relatively recent research field (Schaltegger, & Hörisch, 2017), there is no research examining how organizational narratives can be used to produce a change towards becoming more sustainable. That is why this study will shed new light on the following research question:

"How is change towards sustainability produced in organizational narratives?"

In this paper sustainability will be considered as "an approach rooted in belief that organizations can and must materially contribute to the betterment of society" (Soyka, 2012, p. 17). By answering the research question this study will provide new answers on how and which organisational sustainability narratives can be used in order to start the transition towards becoming more sustainable. It will also give insights in how organizational sustainability narratives might influence organizational identities. The research question is answered in the form of a case study at an international manufacturer of household goods. The case company has over 800 fulltime employees from which over 100 work at the headquarters. The company has an international focus as its products are sold in over 80 countries. The last decade sustainability has become of bigger importance to the company and became part of their strategy. Sixteen unstructured open interviews have been conducted with different organizational members from different organizational level. Besides, company documents) are used as empirical material. A thematic analysis has been conducted on both of the data materials. The findings of this study contribute to the literature of organizational narratives by providing an understanding of organizational sustainability narratives. This by giving concrete topics that are important to be told in an organizational change towards sustainability. In addition, the findings provide new insights and understanding in the field of sustainable organizational identities by showing in a concrete manner how an organizational sustainable identity can develop. Lastly this research adds to the understanding of resistance towards organizational narratives and the acceptance of a new organizational identity. From a business perspective, this study can provide guidelines to help businesses to start an internal transition towards becoming more sustainable. This is of importance because the number of organizations that are becoming sustainable is growing (Thomas & Lam, 2012).

To the end, the paper is structured as follows: first there is a literature review about the main topics of the paper. Next, the methodology, which is used, is presented. Then the results are given and analysed. Finally, there is a discussion and conclusion of the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the following topics will be discussed: organizational sustainability narratives, organizational identity and a framework that ties all concepts concerning this research together.

2.1 Organizational sustainability narratives

The study of organizational discourses has gained growing popularity in the recent years (Doolin, 2003). Discourses are practices of writing and talking that collectively constitute how a concept is understood by a given communality of social actors. Discourse is the language, ideas and practices that condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon a particular topic (Knights & Morgan, 1991). It can relate a social reality in such a way that certain outcomes are realized rather than other others (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015). A discourse also sets the norms for acceptance and uncatchable ways for actors to talk, write and conduct themselves in relation to a topic (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). It becomes the way individuals explain themselves, their actions and organizations, both to themselves and to others (Doolin, 2003). Organizational actors can use discourse activity as a strategic discourse to initiate organizational change (Hardy et al., 2000). So from the discourse perspective, "legitimation can be seen as a discursive process creating senses of legitimacy or illegitimacy in texts and social contexts. That is, certain things come to be portrayed as positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary or otherwise acceptable in the texts in question. In contrast, other things are constructed as negative, harmful, intolerable or, for example, morally reprehensible." (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015, p. 744). When sustainability becomes an important part of an organizational discourse, it will be seen as more positive or valuable and will be more easily adopted as an aspect of positive identity (Roberts & Dutton, 2009).

Discourses can take a narrative form (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives and discourses are thus related terms (Chreim, 2005). Narratives are about telling a story (Cunliff et al., 2004). Stories are an integral part of organizational life and its everyday communication and are

told and retold continually. By their very nature they are not construed consciously, but rather evolve from events, extraordinary situations, successes and failures and so on (Schreyögg & Geiger, 2006). A narrative is a social construct that organizes a group of events and experiences into a story, which researchers can study and interpreted (Cunliff et al., 2004; Landau et al., 2014). Narratives make communicable what is considered valuable in an organization (Starkey & Crane, 2003). Organizational narratives are part of an organizations culture and convey expected attitudes and behaviours and create a common ground for social action within an organization (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Narratives are sense-making in the way that organizational actors construct reality (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Doolin, 2003; Vaara et al., 2016). Sensemaking is a process in which people give meaning to experience (Weick, 1995). When for example focused on the organizational identity perspective, one answers the question: "Who are we as an organization?" (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Weick (1995) states: What is necessary in sensemaking is a good story. "A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interests of sensemaking" (Weick, 1995 p. 61). Narratives are also sense-giving in the discursive activities of management in presenting their own construction of organizational change (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Doolin, 2003; Vaara et al., 2016).

The words story and narrative are often used interchangeably in narrative research, but they are not the same. Stories consist of coherent plotlines or characters. Narratives do not have these (Cunliff et al., 2004). Organizational narratives do consist of organizational key texts, messages and annual reports (Chreim, 2005). Also daily conversations are part of the organizational narratives, however these conversations are fleeting and, unlike written texts, are difficult to retrieve for later study (Ricoeur, 1971; Doolin, 2003; Chreim, 2005). Narratives are means by which an organization is told and performed. Narratives have a temporal aspect (Stevenson & Greenberg, 1998; Symon & Cassell, 2012; Vaara et al., 2016). They have a specific beginning, a series of intervening actions, and an

end point that is arrived at based upon the numerous of paths and the interconnections between the intervening actions (Griffin, 1993; Stevenson & Greenberg, 1998; Symon & Cassell, 2012). Different and multiple narratives can coexist and interact within an organizational setting (Doolin, 2003; Chreim, 2005). Due to these multiple narratives the process of organizational change can be "linked to painting a picture by a group of organizational actors, each of whom reads the salutation differently and adds their perspective to the pool of interpretations" (Reissner, 2011, p. 4). Different stories will thus be "variously appropriated, discounted, championed and defended" (Barry & Elmes, 1997, p. 432). Some narrators are, however, likely to figure more prominently than others in terms of, for example frequency, intensity or credibility (Schreyögg & Geiger, 2006). New narratives need to establish a balance between difference with the existing narratives and familiarity with those narratives to allow a discourse to develop (Perey, 2015).

Narratives are studied in different research fields. Within the literary and cultural studies, they focus on the underlying formal structure, coherence, sequencing, and purpose of stories (whether fact or fiction, oral or written) (Chreim, 2005). Researchers also study narratives from a social sciences perspective, structuralism perspective and a communication perspective (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Wright et al., 2012). In the field of organization and management studies, they often use narratives as a research method to see what they might tell us about aspects of organizational life such as culture, processes, strategy, and identities (Cunliffe et al., 2004). Here, narratives are generally recognized as theoretical perspective for organizational identity (Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2019). Narrative research is used to explore how identities are constructed, and how meaning is made and shared among organizational members (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In relation to organizational change, narratives help scholars to understand how organizations evolve (change) and how actors shape this evolution (Vaara et al., 2016)

There are multiple kinds of narrative perspective that have been prominent in organizational change research (Vaara et al., 2016). Organizational

narratives help scholars to understand how organizations evolve and how actors shape this evolution. Narratives can serve multiple key functions within an organization. First, Narratives are able to persuade organizational members to adopt specific understandings and to encourage desired action (Dunford & Jones, 2000). Secondly, narratives also attribute responsibility for failure and to legitimate group action and its outcomes; they can justify outcomes (Chreim, 2005; Doolin, 2003). Next to that, narratives provide descriptions of sequences of events, which frame these events as change or stability. Narratives can also be influential in organizational processes, where they can change the trajectory of events that unfolds, which in turn may change the organization. In this regard, narratives have performative power (i.e., narratives are constitutive acts) and agency (i.e., narratives may bring about change in organizations) (Vaara et al., 2016; Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2019). Thus, narratives can have causal impacts on organizational change by shaping understandings of the past and trajectories of the future (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). However, most important for this paper, they are able to bridge the strange to the familiar, thus facilitating change (Pondy, 1983; Chreim, 2005). Narratives can help organizational members to accept future changes (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Change almost necessarily involves a narratives representation because of its temporal development (Vaara et al., 2016).

With climate change becoming the major social, political and economic challenge of this century (Wright et al., 2012), businesses change their business models to become more sustainable. Recent literature has shown that organizational narratives can help organizational members to accept future changes and thus can facilitate change (e.g. Pondy, 1983; Chreim, 2005; Bartel & Garud, 2009). Launda, Drori and Terjesen (2014) argue that during planned change, managers engage in the construction of multiple narratives for achieving both external and internal legitimacy for the change. So, in order to start the change towards sustainability, organizational sustainability narratives might be the solution. Organizational sustainability narratives can be deployed deliberately and are the explicit communication and the representation of underlying

substantive greening (Matejek & Gössling, 2014). It has been proven that narratives have an important influence on the perception of environmental issues in business (Starkey & Crane, 2003; Preuss & Dawson, 2009). Next to that, Dawson (2005) argues that narratives are valuable to promote environmental virtues to managers and shareholders, which in turn helps by achieving internal legitimacy for the change. However, there is no research explicitly examining the role of narratives on the transition towards becoming more sustainable (Pruess & Dawson, 2009). That is why this research will try to elaborate on that research field to fill the gap.

2.1.1 Legitimacy: reason why organizational sustainable narratives are important

Within research, the interest in corporate social and environmental performance has grown in the last years. Scholars have started to empirically examine the question why companies engage in sustainable activities (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Schaltegger & Hörisch, 2017). Reasons why companies are dealing with sustainability activities can be explained by the 'legitimacy view'. Legitimacy has been defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The essence of legitimacy is 'Is it the right thing to do?' (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). When legitimacy is applied to managerial actions and innovations such as business sustainability, this definition can be adapted to ''the perception that organizational (strategic, structural, or procedural) changes that are proposed or implemented by organizational leaders are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, or beliefs.'' (Thomas & Lamm, 2012, p. 193).

As became clear in the introduction, norms, values, beliefs and definitions regarding appropriate businesses have expanded beyond the simple goal of profitability and include social and environmental goals as well. Meaning that meeting social and environmental expectations is becoming increasingly important to the public eye (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). Next to that,

corporate stakeholders, the media, including social media, NGO watchdogs, and governmental regulators have all been putting increased pressure on businesses to become corporate environmental responsible. Resulting in that they have to strategically consider and manage the impact of their products and operations on the natural environment (Matejek & Gössling, 2014)

With the trend in which the expectations about how to do business changes from a profit-based view towards a more sustainability-based view puts pressure on businesses. It is often argued that businesses that violate societal rules lose legitimacy whereas those organizations that contribute to the well-being of societies will be rewarded accordingly (Matejek & Gössling, 2014). Companies that are contradicting to those social and environmental norms, values and beliefs risk losing their legitimacy. In that case, consumers and investors can take economic action, thus not buy the respective products or shares any more, employees can take organizational behaviour actions in the sense of withdrawing commitment and losing motivation (Gössling, 2011). So, legitimacy theory deals with the importance of organizational legitimacy for an organization's survival and addresses the question of how to reach balance between corporate and sustainability goals (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

So, if organizational sustainability narratives are being able to help organizational members to accept future changes and thus to facilitate change (e.g. Pondy, 1983; Chreim, 2005; Bartel & Garud, 2009), they can be a way for an organization to be perceived as legitimate inside and outside the organization.

2.2 Organizational identity

The attitudes, support and cooperation of employees are highly determinative for the successful introduction of new strategies, structures and processes (Herscovitch & Meyer 2002; Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Lines, 2004). The extent to which executives and managers embrace or resist the sustainability trend can determine the success or failure of a firm's efforts to operate in a more sustainable way (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). It is important that the sustainability strategies and initiatives come to be perceived as legitimate by managers and executives (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). It is a fundamental step towards facilitating the adoption and effective implementation of sustainability since attitudes such as perceived legitimacy can influence an individual's intention to act (Ajzen, 2001; Thomas & Lamm, 2012). Signs of scepticism, cynicism from employees can lead to passive indifference or active resistance towards change (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Lines, 2004; Bommer et al., 2005). So, in order to successfully implement new sustainability strategies, structures or processes, it is important that all employees support the change.

Organizational identity can influence the actions of the members of an organization so that they will have a positive attitude towards the change. When for example environmental considerations are/or become an integral part of the organizational identity, it is more difficult to ignore environmental issues within an organization such that they may be legitimated as an integral part of organizational identity (Sharma et al., 1999; Chang & Chen, 2013). The change towards sustainable practices covers many aspects of an organization and is therefore seen as a change of big magnitude. Such a change needs a transformation in the organizational identity (Roberts & Dutton, 2009).

There are two other bodies of literature discussing narratives related to identity, namely: personal identities and corporate identities. Personal identities are also known as social identities and are understood as an "individuals' knowledge that they belong to certain groups together with the emotional and value significance of that group membership" (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p. 3). Corporate identities can be defined as "the distinctive public image that a

corporate entity communicates that structures people's engagement with it" (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p. 3). Organizational identity can be scaled in the middle of these two forms of identity. Organizational identity is related to the identity of the organization as a whole (Cornelissen et al., 2007). The main focus in this paper lies on the organizational identity, as a change in organizational identity might be able to get all employees behind the change towards sustainability.

Organizational identity is one of the most prevalent themes in the field of organization studies (Doolin, 2003). In 1985, Albert & Whetten were the first to define organizational identity. They proposed that organizational identity is that which is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization. Similar to legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), organizational identity is objectively held—it has a reality independent of individual observers— although it is subjectively arrived at (Scott & Lane, 2000). Organizational identity is the shared answer to the question 'who are we as an organization?' (Corley, 2004; Hamilton & Gioia, 2009). It represents how organizational members define themselves as a social group and what distinguishes their organization from other organizations. It can also provide the foundation for presenting images of the organization to outsiders (Alvesson, 1990; Gioia et al., 2000; Corley, 2004; Empson, 2004). Organizational identity can be seen from two perspectives: the enduring identity perspective and the dynamic identity (Gioia et al., 2013). The enduring organizational identity view is the older one of the two and assumes that organizational identity 'exhibits some degree of sameness or continuity of time' and that organizational identity is something stable (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265; Whetten & Mackey, 2002; Chreim, 2005). This suggests that identity is something durable, permanent, unchanging, and stable over long periods of time (Gioia et al., 2013). In this view, the process of change is assumed to be gradual, cumulative and the progression of change is unitary (a single sequence) and essentially linear (Gioia et al., 2013). So, organizations can change over time, and thus organizational identity can also change, but only over extended periods of time. In contradiction, the dynamic identity perspective assumes that changes happen in more vibrant terms and occurs over notability shorter periods. It assumes that changes in identity can

happen radically and sometimes even continuously (Gioia et al., 2013). A changing organization can construct an envisioned state, takes action to reach it, and monitors it progress (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Identity change can be planned and be deliberate (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). This dynamic view of identity resonates that identity change can be planned, deliberate and of big magnitude. Further on in this research, it is assumed that change can happen dynamically as this view is most aligned with most recent theory (e.g. Gioia et al., 2013; Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2019; Bednar et al., 2020).

Many organizations experience a resistance towards change from their employees. It is estimated that the failure rates of change efforts are nearly 40 per cent (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). The change towards sustainable business practices requires a profound change in organizational identity. To implement sustainable practices a deep-seated change in the way most organizations today conduct themselves is needed to be successful. The change is far more likely to become a permanent when there is a deeply held commitment to sustainability int the way of thinking and acting. It requires transformation in the way organizations and their members see themselves. (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). With a change of this magnitude, a transformation in the organizational identity is needed in which sustainability becomes a fundamental, indispensable part of the organizational identity (Roberts & Dutton, 2009).

A way in which sustainability-focused organizational identities can develop is trough discourses (Roberts & Dutton, 2009) and organizational narratives. This because a central part of legitimation takes places trough narratives and discourses (Golant & Silince, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Narratives play a critical role in the structuring of identity (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Organizational narratives have the potential of reframing organizational experience to suit a specific purpose (Chreim, 2005). They provide means to construct and reconstruct the identity and the purpose of an organization (Chreim, 2007). A case study research of Schultz and Hernes (2013) provides a temporal perspective on organizational identity in which constructions of the past, present and future play a crucial role. The case study shows that that the past

can be evoked distinctively differently to influence claims for future identity. Withing sensemaking theory, the old identity/nostalgia is also a common theme. It can help actors compare their current experiences with past ones, representing the past in an idealized manner (Reissner, 2011). It helps to maintain a sense of continuity (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). Fiol (2002) adopted a Lewin-inspired framework of unfreeze-move-refreeze and theorizes that narratives help employees bridge change and stability by providing them with language to dis-identify with the old and re-identify with the new. Organizational identity is continually constituted in organizational narratives that are woven by organizational authors. By composing these narratives, these authors utilize themes and discursive strategies that can establish change (Chreim, 2005). So, organizational members can develop alternative narratives that interpret the social context differently to endorse change (Bartel & Garud, 2009).

2.3 Framework

In order to clarify the relations between the different concepts in this study, the concepts will be put together in this framework. The aim of this research is to examine how *organizational narratives* can help organizations to become more *sustainable*. Next to that this research aims to give additional insights in how the new *organizational identity* is influenced by those organizational sustainability narratives. So, the relation between the two concepts organizational narratives and becoming more sustainable is tested, in which organizational identity might be the mediator.

One of the drivers why this change towards becoming more sustainable is happing is *legitimacy*. The company will feel pressure or the need to do the right thing in order to get approval of the audience, inside and outside the organization (Suchman, 1995; Thomas & Lamm, 2012). When becoming more sustainable, companies have to undergo a big change. In order to incorporate this change in the entire company, all employees, have to support the change. The new values have to become part of their new organizational identity in order to achieve that support (e.g. Chang & Chen, 2013; Sharma et al., 1999). A way in which an

organizational identity can be constructed and reconstructed in order to create an organizational change are organizational narratives (Chreim, 2007). This research will help us to understand how sustainability narratives are shaped and how these narratives might produce changes towards a more sustainability-oriented organization and sustainable organizational identity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methodology underlying the research process. This section explains why this method is chosen and guides the data collection and the analysis.

3.1 Research design

The aim of this research is to get more insights in which organizational narratives can be employed to facilitate a change towards sustainability. Additionally, this research aims to get insights how and if these organizational sustainability narratives might reconstruct organizational identities in order to facilitate the change towards becoming a more sustainable business. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

> *"How is change towards sustainability produced in organizational narratives?"*

In order to answer this research questions, a research method must be determined. A research method describes the scientific approach to answering the research question. Different research methods may be applicable depending on the circumstances. The research design of this research is a qualitative case study. A case study is the preferred research method when research questions start with 'how' (Yin, 2017). Case studies allow the exploration and understanding of complex issues. This by presenting data of real-life situations and by giving insights into the detailed behaviours of the subjects which may not be captured trough experimental or survey research.

The reason for this is that that a case study can not only give information concerning for example strategies that are used, but also for the reasons behind this strategy, and how there are used in relation to other strategies (Zainal, 2007). By carrying out a case study this research is not only able to show that organizational narratives can help to construct a new organizational identity that aligns with the new sustainable course of the organization, but also how organizational narratives can do that. It will give detailed insights in the process.

Using a case study as a method, researchers can access narratives and analyse their mimetic content, that is, what the story says. Besides, they can also analyse how the story is told and who narrates it (Cunliffe et al., 2004). However, as narrative organizational researchers, we are telling stories of others. We cannot avoid enacting and placing ourselves within those stories. (Cunliffe et al., 2004). The narrative under investigation is a 'composite', meaning that the narrative is composed by the researcher from multiple sources of data (Symon & Cassell, 2012).

3.2 Case description

In order to explore the concepts of the research problem, a case study is chosen. Because of anonymity reasons a company pseudonym is used: HouseGoods. HouseGoods is a Dutch international manufacturer of household goods, which they sell via their website and via retailers globally. The company has an international focus as its products are sold in over 80 countries. They offer products to their consumers for decades and are known for their quality and integrity. Since a couple of years, sustainability has become of bigger importance to the company. Since then, they try to achieve the ultimate sustainable production process by reducing waste and energy usage, using sustainable materials and by trying to bring more cradle-to-cradle products to the market. Next to that, HouseGoods also tries to bring more housekeeping products to the market that help customers achieving a more sustainable lifestyle. HouseGoods has over 800 fulltime employees from which over 100 work at the Dutch headquarters.

3.3 Data collection

The narratives are analysed via a thematic analysis. The data is collected through various data collection techniques, namely: open interviews and document-analysis.

First of all, narratives are important research outputs, since meaning is constructed trough the narratives told by the data. This makes the research

narratives meaning-making devices through which the researcher constructs identities. In this case, narratives are treated as a form of 'verbal action', accomplishing the construction of organizational identities (Symon & Cassell, 2012).

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis

There are multiple ways in which narratives can be analysed, from which the thematic analysis is probably the most common kind of analysis. In aim of a thematic analysis is to identify key themes that are common to all narratives within the set. Thematic analyses are often used to answer questions like: 'How do members construct their organizational identity?'. This because the thematic analyses can be especially valuable in understanding the content conveyed in a narrative (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Because this research is aiming to get more insights how narratives can produce a change towards sustainability, a thematic analysis is most suited. A thematic analysis provides valuable insights into how the narratives at HouseGoods are shaped and how these narratives produce changes (Symon & Cassell, 2012) towards becoming more sustainable.

For a thematic analysis, diverse kinds of narrative data can be used, including stories gathered in interviews, shared between individuals or captured within documents (Symon & Cassell, 2012). These kinds of data are also used within this research. Multiple narratives from different employees and documents are analyses. It is most common to work with multiple narratives, searching for themes that are constant across all or within sub-groups of stories (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Next to that, a thematic analysis can be either theory-led (drawing on previous studies) or more inductively derived (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In this case, themes will be derived from the data to provide core narrative plots, so it is inductively derived.

3.3.2 Open interviews

Interviews are a common research method for researchers to analyse narratives (Cunliffe et al., 2004), especially in a thematic analysis (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In

this study, data is obtained via sixteen open interviews with employees working at HouseGoods. According to Guest et al. (2006, p. 79) twelve interviews should be sufficient to reach saturation, as they state "for most research enterprises, however, in which the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogenous individuals, twelve interviews should suffice". Kuzel (1992) also recommended that six to eight interviews are sufficient for a homogenous sample, and that twelve to twenty interviews are sufficient for a more heterogeneous sample. This makes sixteen interviews sufficient to reach saturation. Table 1 shows all the employees that have been interviewed. A part of the interviewees are from the (top) management team of HouseGoods. This because these managers are most involved in discussions and decisions about the strategic response of the organization to the changing conditions in which it was operating (Dunford & Jones, 2000). These managers can be seen as the identifiable narrative voice (Dunford & Jones, 2000). However, it is likely that different narratives are constructed by employees, for example, in their daily conversations and that such narratives evolved over the years (Chreim, 2005). Next to that, organizational identity is also very much related to how the employees find it legitimate and how it is brought to them or how they themselves construct it based on the messages they get from the management. For this reason, also other employees, next to the management team, were interviewed. To ensure privacy, all interviewees are anonamyzed in this study.

The length of the interview is around 40 minutes. The interviews are unstructured, also called open interviews, allowing people to tell their story in their own words, it are questions that will not elicit a 'yes' or 'no' answer (Bolderston, 2012). It is about not putting things in someone's mind but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1996; Zang & Wildemuth, 2009; Qu & Dumay, 2011). An unstructured interview guide might include a few predetermined questions allowing the interviewer to explore issues brought forward by the interviewee (McGrath et al., 2019). In an unstructured interview, the interviewer must develop, adapt and generate follow-up questions reflecting the central purpose of the research (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1996). The

interviewer has conversations with interviewees and generates questions in response to the interviewees' narration (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Although the interviews will be unstructured, they focus on particular themes to be covered during the interview to help direct the conversation toward the topics and issues about which the interviewers want to learn (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1996). It is recommended to start the open interview with a few easy questions to make the interviewee comfortable and to familiarize him/her with the subject of the interview (McGrath et al., 2019). On the basis the original interview schedule is progressively complemented by questions that reflected recurring issues from earlier interviews. Appendix I shows the interview questions, and appendix II shows the interview protocol. Before the interviews took place, all interviewees gave permission to record the interview and to be anonymously cited. Next to that, interviewees were told that they did not need to answer the interview questions if they did not want to and that they could stop the interview at any time. After the interviews the interviewees were asked for any type of materials, documents and emails they could give, in order to find more relevant information. After the interviews, all transcripts were shared with the respective interviewees for verification. Interviewees had the opportunity to make alterations to the transcripts as they pleased. Only a few minor corrections were made, and no meaning was lost.

Respondent number	Function	Modality (face-to-face or video call)
1	E-commerce Manager	Video Call
2	Human Resource Manager	Video Call
3	CEO	Video Call
4	Quality and Sustainability Manager	Video Call
5	E-commerce Manager	Video Call
6	Commercial Director	Video Call
7	IT	Face-to-face
8	Packaging Engineer	Face-to-face
9	Product/Concept designer	Video Call
10	Global Sourcing Manager	Video Call
11	E-commerce Marketeer	Video Call
12	Consumer Service	Video Call
13	Supply Chain Engineer	Video Call
14	Management Assistant	Video Call
15	Category Manager	Video Call
16	Key Account Manager	Video Call

Table 1: Sample of interviewees.

3.3.3 Documents necessary

Besides the open interviews, data is also collected via multiple company documents. Multiple researchers use documents and brochures to analyse narratives (e.g. Dunford & Jones, 2000; Chreim, 2005). The company documents and publicly available documents that are used in the analysis are listed in table 2.

Kind of document	**Company document or publicly available document**
Business Ethics	Company document
Data gathered from website	Publicly available
Two interviews given by the CEO	Publicly available

Table 2: Documents used for analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

After the interviews were conducted as described above, they were transcribed in order to upload them in Atlas.ti for analysing. Atlas.ti is qualitative data analysis software that enables the researcher to manually code any text documents, so in case of this research the transcripts and the company documents. Next to that, potential relationships between codes can be found trough the code- occurrence explorer. The use of qualitative data analysis software such as Atlas.ti has some benefits. Firstly, the analysis becomes more transparent and replicable, which is meaningful in all social science disciplines. (Hwang, 2008). This makes the research more credible. Second, analysing data via qualitative data analysis software "can be time saving and more effective" (Hwang, 2008, p. 521). The data is analysed following the steps of Braun & Clarke (2006). Table 3 gives an overview of the six steps.

In the first phase of the analysis, I coded the empirical material with initial intuitive codes to get a grasp of what was discussed in relation to sustainability in the organization. A myriad of informant terms and codes emerged in this stage of the research. Little attempt was made to distil categories, so the number of categories was 149 codes. However, according to Gioia, Corley and Hamilton

(2013) its common that the number of categories tends to explode on the front end of the study. When the research progressed, I tried to find similarities and differences between the codes, which reduced the codes to the more manageable number of 40 codes. These are visualized in figure 1, as first order codes. Afterwards, the second order codes arose by assessing the question: Is there some deeper structure?. The second order codes were distilled even further into four aggregate dimensions of the organizational sustainability narrative structure, which we later called as the 'pillars' of the sustainability narrative. Figure 1 visualizes the data structure and shows how this study progressed from raw data to terms and themes (Gioia et al., 2013b).

Familiarizing with data	Transcribing data, reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis for redefining the specifics of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the final report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid results, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a report of the analysis.

*Table 3: Steps of a thematic analysis (*Braun & Clarke, 2006).

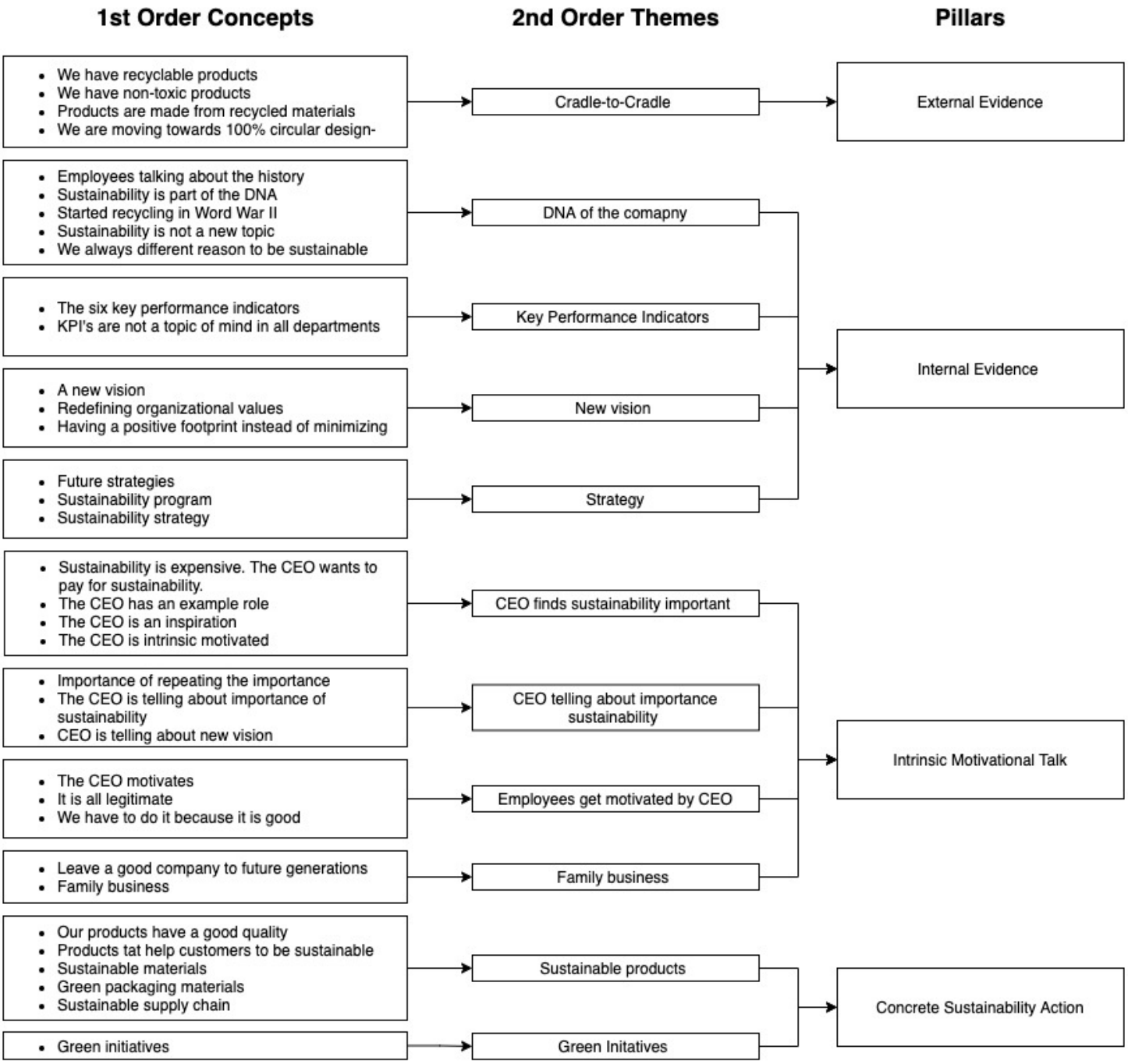

Figure 1: Data structure.

4. RESULTS

This section describes the outcomes of the thematic analysis on the case study of HouseGoods.

4.1 Organizational sustainability narrative

The organizational internally legitimate sustainability narrative that emerged from the data lies upon four pillars. These pillars represent topics that are important to be told within a company when being in the transition towards becoming more sustainable. The four pillars that build the organizational sustainability narrative are: (a) external evidence, (b) internal evidence, (c) intrinsic motivational talk, (d) concrete sustainability action.

4.1.1 Pillar I -External Evidence

The organizational sustainability narrative was supported by external evidence of sustainability, such as labels and certificates of sustainability awarded to the organization by external organizations and institutions. Herewith they can prove not only to the outside world but also them themselves that they are putting in effort to be sustainable.

At the HouseGoods they used the cradle-to-cradle certificate as external evidence. This means that the cradle-to-cradle institute assesses their products on material quality, material recycling, the use of renewable energy and carbon management, water management and social justice. Employees argue that cradle-to-cradle is really important for the company and that it proves that they are sustainable. For example, one employee told:

> *"The fact that over 1000 products are cradle-to-cradle certified shows that something happened in the last years. Instead of trying to minimalize our bad behaviour, we started with the cradle-to-cradle philosophy in 2012."*

Employees thus argue that cradle-to-cradle also shows to others inside and outside the company that they are sustainable. It is a kind of external review with

which they can say that they are doing a good job in terms of sustainability. For example: *"Cradle-to-cradle, it is an appreciation of our products that makes it really clear that we are working on sustainability".* So, the external evidence does not only make clear to the employees that sustainability is a topic within the company, but also to the outside world. All publicly available analysed documents also mentioned that it is their goal to have all products cradle-to-cradle certificated. So, it can be said that the narrative cultivated this evidence to underline the achieved sustainability merits and to highlight the future sustainability efforts of the organization.

4.1.2 Pillar II - Internal evidence

The second pillar is constructed of internal strategic proof that supports the organizations internal strategic evidence of sustainability, such as such as KPIs and a renewed (sustainable) vision, that supported the identity construction of the organization.

Sustainability became part of the strategy of the case company. Developing new plans, programs and strategies about sustainability is an often-mentioned theme in the data set. An example showing this: "*What we actually want for the next five years, because we have a five-year strategy plan each time, is taking sustainability to a higher level."* It seems that having a defined plan and strategy about sustainability is important for the employees to address it in their own work. This means the sustainability narrative includes the element long term strategic thinking. Subthemes about strategy that come up often are the renewed vision including sustainability and the key performance indicators about sustainability. These themes can be seen as examples of how a company can incorporate sustainability in their strategy.

<u>Renewed vision</u>

Employees of the HouseGoods often explain that sustainability is part of their vision. Being sustainable is one of the three things they want to propagate with

their vision: *"When we look at what we want to convey, having beautiful, sustainable and pleasurable products."*

Key performance indicators

A second internal subtheme related to strategy that came up often are the six key performance indicators that the company has on sustainability. The company has six production related key performance indicators. These include renewable energy, preventing waste, preventing the use of fossil substances, preventing the use of toxic substances and so forth. These key performance indicators are telling if they are heading in the right direction. Key performance indicators are a topic that is spoken of often within the company. During meetings about new products colleagues frequently ask critical questions concerning the product like: *"What kind of materials will we use and how are we going to produce it?"*. This is one of the examples that one of the employees gave. Not only in new product meetings are key performance indicators discussed, also during other events like a presentation or a strategical session like quarterly meetings and end of the year events. So, the key performance indicators are a common topic at HouseGoods that are imbedded within the organization. A citation exemplifying this: *"These objectives are set and are repeated and mentioned continuously. That helps."*

4.1.3 Pillar III – Intrinsic motivational talk

The third pillar the organizational sustainability narrative rests on is intrinsic motivational talk, particularly promoted by the CEO. The CEO of HouseGoods almost always addresses sustainability as a topic in his speech, he gives motivational talks. He proclaims it every time he can. Here is one of a dozen similar citations illustrating it: *"He keeps talking about it, internally and externally about his vision on sustainability".* By proclaiming the importance of sustainability, most employees get motivated to also think about sustainability. In the following citation, an employee expresses how he/she gets motivated to be sustainable:

"The CEO and his presentations including his own motivation, that is the most important one. That sets the agenda. That makes people enthusiastic to also think that way about what to do as a business".

Another employee said:

"I think if there was another CEO that was not concerned with sustainability, it would have been different. Then it would not have been such a part of the culture, and not everyone had agreed with it. Also because it is so substantiated, what he says is correct. It is hard to deny the environmental pollution or to say that sustainability is not important, while we know the pollution is only getting worst. The CEO is also very motivated on this topic and is always looking for innovation. It is nice to see that he can get everyone on board. In that way you can achieve good results".

They feel the possibility to come up with sustainability initiatives and to apply sustainability in their daily work:

"When we know that the board has interest in sustainability, it more or less feels as an invitation to look to more sustainable materials in product proposals. In the past money was the main factor, it had to be as cheap as possible. However, since this CEO has been appointed is sustainability of bigger importance and do employees feel invited to also come up with more expensive proposals knowing it is more sustainable".

Employees argue that the CEO is one of the driving forces behind the quick changes towards sustainability. He can inspire a motivate people. This mainly because employees believe him because the CEO is intrinsic motivated to be sustainable. His own words are: *"It is just the right thing to do. There is no higher science behind it, there is no deeper layer. It is just the right thing to do."*. Another motivation to be sustainable that the CEO expresses towards the employees is that

they want to leave the company 100% circular to its next generation. As HouseGoods is a family business, a reoccurring theme is that they want to leave a proper business for the next generations. The CEO explains:

> *"The first step we set was describing what we want as a company. We are a family busines. We came up with the main objective that we want to leave the company more beautiful, pleasurable, sustainable and profitable to the next generation. That means for us that we want to transfer the organization 100% recyclable."*

Also employees see this as a goal they are working towards. The CEO is seen as an important factor in the transformation towards a more sustainable business. Multiple employees describe: *"It is the personal motivation of the CEO, that makes it different then when you have a CEO that put emphasis on sustainability because all the others also do it."* So, the motivational talk highlighted foremost the commitment to the environment, family values and society.

4.1.4 Pillar IV - Concrete sustainability action

The fourth pillar the narrative leaned on is concrete sustainability action in form of green initiatives and green products. It is mentioned as an important factor for employees to identify with because it makes the sustainability efforts more tangible.

<u>Green initiatives</u>

HouseGoods funds different sustainability initiatives. These are initiatives like planting a tree, cleaning the ocean and battling hunger. These initiatives are coupled to products. Meaning that if you buy a product, a percentage of the money goes to the charity. With these collaborations, they want to contribute to the awareness:

"It shows that that trees are the way to stop global warming. That there are ways to prevent hunger in the world. Creating awareness around people, let them know they can also contribute. That is what we want by these easy combinations with our products. Giving people the feeling that they contributed to it."

These collaborations make it easier to explain to the customers that you have a sustainable product. But what also came up is that these initiatives also motivate the employees because it is more tangible that most other sustainability numbers:

"I think that employees can also like it, we have sold an x-amount of products so we can plant a lot of trees. It is way more tangible then this much % of this and that much % of that. I think that is what made it come to life."

<u>Sustainability of the product</u>

An element that came up frequently in the sustainability narrative is that the company has sustainable products. One employee described case their products as follows: "*We have quality products made from sustainable materials".* Next to the use of sustainable materials, the products are also sustainable because of their long lifetime. One of the stories that came up that shows the lifetime of the products is about a customer:

"Some time ago, I received a call from an end consumer who complained about her ironing board. She got the ironing table as a gift for her wedding and the protective caps would not be in order anymore. Since I heard that it is an elderly woman on the phone, I asked carefully when she got married. She told me that she has already celebrated her golden wedding (50 years). The ironing board is the only gift that she is still using. And it was still in a perfect condition. Only the protective caps would have to be replaced.".

This citation is not only told by interviewees but is also archived in one of the company documents about the centenary. This citation shows that the products have an extraordinary quality.

Next to good quality and sustainable materials is the production process also as sustainable as possible: *"For our internal production we strive to have it as sustainable as possible".* External suppliers are audited before they start to collaborate.

4.2 Change promoting narrative elements

In this phase of the analyses, the change promoting narrative elements related to each pillar are distinguished from the more stable expressions of the narrative. I came to the conclusion that change towards more sustainability-oriented organization was produced through three main narrative tactics: harnessing key identity elements for a new purpose, authoring a 'higher' organizational purpose and making it tangible.

4.2.1 Pillars I & II: External Evidence & Internal Evidence

There are elements of these pillars that produced a change towards a more sustainable organizational identity. These elements of the narrative harnessed key organizational characteristics of the company for a new purpose. An example of HouseGoods reharnessing their key organizational characteristics is by redefining their values as part of their new strategy and vision. They looked into who they are and who they want to be. That resulted in naming already existing values and formulating new ones. As the CEO describes, these values are explanatory for everything they do:

> *"The five values are the foundation of everything we do, and I will keep repeating that until the end of time. Meanwhile, it has also become part of the strategy."*

One of the five values is 'conscious' and is directly linked to being sustainable. This value is explained by employees as: *"We do everything from a conscious perspective, we just want to do good. We want to be the solution and not a part of the problem".* So, sustainability is part of the foundation of everything they do. When asked to fairly new employee: How did you learn that sustainability is important for company X? She answered:

> *"Actually right from the start. When you start to work at company X you already learn about the core values and what they find important. Sustainability comes to the fore enormously."*

Given the fact that also the new employee already experiences that sustainability is such a big part of the values of the company and everything the company finds important, it can be stated that doing good and being sustainable has become an integral part of their values and who they are.

Another example is that it is argued by employees that sustainability is not something new but that has always been a part of the DNA of the company. The only thing that changed is the reason to be sustainable:

> *"Originally it has been from way back. We always have a different reason to be sustainable. First we started in a small village. Everyone, the whole village works at your company. So you have to have sustainable human-relations and have to be sustainable towards the environment because you do not want to pollute the whole village. Later did the war showed that there are simply no materials. So, you have to be sustainable, take back materials to make something new: recycling. Now we believe that in the future the resources are finite at some point and that we are exhausting the earth, so let's do it in a way we support and that is good."*

Here they constantly reharnessed the reason to be sustainable, resulting that they feel it has been part of their organizational identity forever.

A last example of harnessing key organizational characteristics of the company for a new purpose is by redefining their definition of having products with a good quality. HouseGoods is known for its solid products for many years. Since a few years, they also started to couple this quality to sustainability, even though quality has been part of their strategy and image for decades. They argue that long-lasting products are sustainable because you do not have to replace it that often, resulting in less trash. A citation describing this is as follows:

> *"We have responsible products that last long, we don't want to be a part of the throwaway society. On the contrary, if you buy from us, we make sure that you can get spare parts for the product for at least ten years. This to make sure you don't have to throw away anything. That has actually been there from way back".*

There has been a change from purely quality to quality and sustainability. So instead of focussing only on quality as benefit for customers their new identity construction focusses on quality as a source of sustainability.

4.2.2 Pillar III - Intrinsic motivational talk

The pillar intrinsic motivational talk produced a change in the organizational identity by the narrative tactic: authoring a 'higher' organizational purpose. Meaning that sustainability is not a matter of compulsory reasons like being social to the village, customer demands or a lack of materials but rather a moral choice. *As company we find it important to do good, and we have the possibility to do it.".* As an employee describes, they do not want to contribute to the pollution problem: *"One of the main reasons to become more sustainable is to make it possible for future generations to also life in this world*.". By having a figurehead like the CEO who conveys this message repeatedly, the employees started to see it as a responsibility and just something that is normal to do. "One bullet point in the business ethics that all employees agree to is: *"do the right thing".* This proves that doing the right thing has become part of their organizational identity.

An important outcome related to this third pillar worth mentioning is that 70% of the interviewees told that it is important to repeat the relevance of sustainability (thus why it is important to be sustainable) towards the employees regularly. At HouseGoods the theme sustainability has been repeated a lot by the CEO in a lot of different settings. An employee made a nice comparison explaining this:

> *"You know what it is? They also do it in the church. You go there every week to hear the same story. That also how it is in this case. It's a matter of continuously repeating and repeating. Because if you say, the CEO told that three years ago, that doesn't work. So, it needs to be repeated all the time and needs to be told in a different way. It has to keep rolling, otherwise it will not become a part of your genes".*

Meaning that the power of repeating is an import element to get sustainability in your organizational identity. Another citation of an employee confirms this: "*If you get confronted with it for years, you are going to take it with you in your work."*

4.2.3. Pillar IV - Concrete sustainability action

Within this pillar the change producing element is that it is making sustainability strategies and visions tangible. Results show that narratives about for example initiatives or products are more tangible than most numbers and thus more efficient in helping members to construct a new and more sustainable organizational identity.

4.3 The role of resistance in directing the change production and the acceptance of the new organizational identity.

Interestingly, although sustainability seemed as a welcomed idea to most organizational members, promoting it on an organizational level met also with resistance, due to different interpretations of the meaning of the organizational narrative. The resistance that came up took the form of critical comments towards

the new organizational identity or elements the narrative. For example, some critical comments of employees to the narrative are that long-lasting or qualitative products are not by definition sustainable. Long-lasting product can be extremely damaging for the world if the wrong materials are used. A citation exemplifying this:

> *"It can be extremely damaging for the world. You can make beautifully products and not take the environment in consideration. But we are doing both. We want quality and sustainability. Quality and sustainability are two different things for me. Of course, products with good quality have a longer lifetime. But it is more important to think about what happens with the product at the end of its life. Can it be recycled? What are you going to do with it? Can it be disposed at bulky waste, and what happens afterwards? I think that is also a part of sustainability. Additionally, it is also about how you make the product, how damaging is that for the environment? So there are more elements to it in my opinion."*

Resistance also came up in the form of a critical remark to third pillar, intrinsic motivational talk. Even though the CEO can motivate people to undertake sustainability actions, all employees are needed for the transition: *"But in the end, all people in the organization are perhaps even more important to achieve it".* So, the motivation of the CEO to be sustainable is a big incentive for the organization to become more sustainable, however all employees are needed to achieve it.

Lastly, some employees argue about the importance of KPI's in the narrative.

> *"These objectives are set and are repeated and mentioned continuously. That helps, on the other hand you can see that a lot of them are production related, so they have less influence for a sales or commercial department."*

So, even though it is an often-returning theme in the dataset, the key performance indicators are all production linked and are for other departments then

production related departments sometimes a bit abstract. Another employee added to the last quotation: *"If you want to give sustainability a place within your company and its culture, then there are more things to look at then only the KPI's"*. Showing that the key performance indicators might not be the strongest element of the sustainability narrative to get sustainability into your identity.

So, even though everyone agrees on a certain level to that sustainability is a good thing and should be part of the daily business operations, there is still some resistance which hinders the promotion of sustainability on an organizational level. This led to tensions between competing organizational identity constructions. This resistance towards the narrative and new organizational identity can be explained by the fact that the results show that different employees have different elements of the narrative they relate to the most. As one employee nicely said: *"One thing is doing more for you than the other".* So, every employee is different, interpreted information different and has other priorities. When most of the employees can identify with elements of the narrative and see it as part of the organizational identity, there can still be others that have a critical view towards it.

However, it can be concluded that the organizational identity changed due to the sustainability narrative. After the company started with a new strategy and vision sustainability became of bigger importance. Before the new vision was introduced, they were looking for the least possible environmental impact. Nowadays they look much more into how they can make a positive contribution to the environment. Sustainability has become much more a part of who they are, as multiple employees describe. A few examples exemplifying this:

> *"I can say that everyone, especially when it comes to the employees, everyone is motivated and busy with sustainability and everyone links our company with a sustainable company."*

"It is an actual topic in our business operations. It doesn't get more attention, but equal attention compared to other topics. So, I think it is just in an integral part of everything we talk about. Where in the past we actually just did it and didn't talk about it and maybe thought less about it, it is now an active part of the whole."

"Making sustainable choices often happens subconsciously, and very good choices are often made within the company. That actually starts with our ethics that everyone adheres to."

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is to get more insights in which organizational narratives can be employed to facilitate a change towards sustainability. Additionally, this research aims to get insights how these organizational sustainability narratives reconstruct organizational identities in order to facilitate the change towards becoming a more sustainable business. This by conducting a case study using interviews and private company documents as well as publicly available company information.

The case study results show that the organizational sustainability narrative told by the employees of HouseGoods rests on four pillars, namely: (a) external evidence, (b) internal evidence, (c) intrinsic motivational talk, (d) concrete sustainability action. The study suggests that these four pillars are important to be present within a company when being in the transition towards becoming more sustainable. The first pillar that the narrative lies upon is external evidence, such as labels and certificates of sustainability awarded to the organization by external organizations and institutions. The narrative cultivated this evidence to underline the achieved sustainability merits and to highlight the future sustainability efforts of the organization. Second, the narrative leans on the pillar internal evidence. This included the organizational internal strategic proofs of sustainability, such as sustainability related key performance indicators and a new vision that supported the identity construction of the organization. The third pillar is intrinsic motivational talk, particularly promoted by the CEO. This talk highlighted foremost the commitment to the environment, family values and society. The last pillar is concrete sustainable action meaning that the narrative leaned on concrete sustainability actions in the form of sustainable products and initiatives.

As a result of these four narrative pillars, a change in the organizational identity took place. The case study results showed three main narrative tactics that supported this change: harnessing key identity elements for a new purpose, authoring a 'higher' organizational purpose and making it tangible. The first tactic

is harnessing key identity elements for a new purpose, meaning that key identity elements are redefined and coupled to sustainability. An example is that the employees of the case company argued that sustainability has always been part of their identity, but that they always had different reasons to be sustainable (i.g. caring about the village you live in, having not enough resources due to the war, just because it is the right thing to do). This tactic can be explained by 'nostalgia' which is a common theme in the sensemaking theory. Nostalgia helps to maintain a sense of continuity (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). With nostalgia actors compare their current experiences with past ones, representing the past in an idealized manner (Reissner, 2011). It can also be explained form a narrative perspective, as Hernes (2013) also showed in his case study that the past can be evoked distinctively differently to influence claims for future identity. Narratives provide means to construct and reconstruct the identity and purpose of an organization (Chreim, 2007). Reharnessing key identity elements for a new purpose is a way of reconstructing the organizational identity and purpose of the organization.

The second tactic is authoring a 'higher' organizational purpose. This study shows that sustainability is not a matter of compulsory anymore but rather a moral choice: just because it is the right thing to do. Employees see it as legitimate and thus the good thing to do, and not something they do as on organization to only raise profits or because everybody does it. Besides, results show that the intrinsic motivation to do the right thing and stories of the CEO about it stimulates this tactic. It makes people enthusiastic and makes them want to contribute. If the CEO or direction is intrinsic motivated to be sustainable, and conveys this message, the employees will perceive this as legitimate and support the change. As Thomas & Lamm (2012) pointed out it is important that the sustainability strategies and initiatives come to be perceived as legitimate by managers and executives. Attitudes such as perceived legitimacy can influence an individual's intention to act (Ajzen, 2001; Thomas & Lamm, 2012). The extent to which employees embrace or resist this sustainability trend can determine the success or failure of a firm's efforts to operate in a more sustainable way (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). So, when a company wants to successfully introduce sustainability

strategies and visions, it is important that the there is a form of motivation talk from the direction. The direction should be able to convey the sustainability message to the employees and argue the importance of it. When people are confronted with it for a long period of time and it has become part of their organizational identity, they are going to take it with them in their work. This is can be linked to existing literature saying that it is more difficult to ignore environmental issues when environmental considerations are in integral part of the organizational identity (Chang & Chen, 2013; Sharma et al., 1999).

The last tactic that came up that promotes change in the organizational identity is making it tangible. Results show that narratives about sustainability initiatives and the products itself are more tangible and thus more efficient in helping members to construct a new and more sustainable organizational identity.

The organizational identity of the HouseGoods changed due to the organizational sustainability narrative. Sustainability became more important and a part of who they are, thus their organizational identity (Corley, 2004; Hamilton & Gioia, 2009). However, even though everyone agrees to the sustainability beliefs, there has been some resistance to the narrative. This resistance takes the form of critical comments on the narrative and the organizational identity. The resistance can lead to difficulties in the construction of the organizational identity, because not everyone agrees to all stories of the narratives in some extent. This kind of resistance can be explained by Reissner (2008, 2011) saying that the process of organizational change and its change stories can be "linked to painting a picture by a group of organizational actors, each of whom reads the salutation differently and adds their perspective to the pool of interpretations" (Reissner, 2011, p. 4). Different stories will thus be "variously appropriated, discounted, championed and defended" (Barry & Elmes, 1997, p. 432). It is part of the process of sensemaking (Reissner, 2011) and thus inevitable when being in the transition towards becoming more sustainable. Overall, it can be concluded that the organizational sustainability narrative resting on the four pillars (a) external evidence, (b) internal evidence, (c) intrinsic motivational talk, (d) concrete

sustainability action produced a change in the organizational identity. Previously they were looking for the least possible environmental impact. Nowadays they look much more into how they can make a positive contribution to the environment. Sustainability has become much more a part of who they are. It is said that narratives are sense-making in a way that organizational actors construct reality (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Doolin, 2003; Vaara et al., 2016). Important in sensemaking is a good story. "A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interests of sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, p. 61). The four pillars of the organizational sustainability narrative and its corresponding change promoting elements have proven to be able to engage employees and to energize them and to guide action, making it an effective organizational narrative to produce a change towards becoming more sustainable.

Contributions

This study contributes to the growth of academic knowledge in multiple ways. First of all, this research contributes to the field of narrative research, in particular change narratives about sustainability. This analysis provides four pillars that an organizational sustainability narrative can rest on, and three change promoting narrative tactics. Previous studies have examined the role of narratives in various kinds of organizational changes (e.g. Pondy, 1983; Doolin, 2003; Chreim, 2005; Bartel & Garud, 2009), but there is limited research on how narratives can be used in a change towards becoming sustainable. This study adds to that research field by broadening the rare knowledge about organizational sustainability narratives. By demonstrating the important pillars of an organizational sustainability narrative, this study contributes to the ongoing research on sustainability narratives by giving concrete topic that are important to be told in an organizational change towards sustainability. By providing the three change promoting narrative tactics this study contributes to the understanding of how narratives can produce change (towards sustainability). These are important

outcomes because the interest in sustainability is growing and these outcomes can contribute to the understanding of change towards sustainability.

Secondly, this research also has broader implications for the study of organizational identities. In particular, this study adds to the research field focusing on the development of sustainable organizational identities. While previous studies already have examined different aspects of sustainable organizational identities (e.g. Chen, 2011; Chang & Chen, 2013), this study has focused on tactics that can be used by organizational members to develop a sustainable organizational identity. The findings of these studies are similar in the sense that they all broaden the knowledge on sustainable organizational identities. However, what is specific in this analysis is that it illustrates a very concrete manner of how sustainable organizational identities can be created. This is important as it helps us to understand specific tactics by which organizational narratives can affect the organizational identity.

Finally, this analysis adds to the understanding of resistance towards organizational narratives and the acceptance of a new organizational identity. It is in alignment with existing literature and shows that different interpretations of the meaning can lead to that stories, narrative elements, are variously appropriated, discounted and championed.

As for practical implications, the discoveries from this research can be of value to companies that are or want to be in a transition towards becoming more sustainable. This is of big relevance because the number of organizations that are becoming sustainable is growing (Thomas & Lam, 2012). It will give practical insights in a way that it will highlight narrative pillars that organizations and their members can use to get sustainability in their organizational identity. It will help them in understanding how they can start the internal transition. The narrative pillars and the change promoting narrative elements, thus the results that came out of its research could be applied by other businesses that want to get a more sustainable.

Lastly, the results have shown the importance of the role of sustainable leadership when it comes to a successful sustainability transition. Firms that want to become more sustainable should have a leader that is fully motivated towards the transition and is able to convey that message.

Limitations

It is possible that a number of limitations may have influenced the results obtained in this research. The first limitation is related to the qualitative nature of the research. The limitation is in terms of generalizability. As the research is a case study on a single company it may limit the applicability of interpreting findings to be extended to wider populations or other contexts. Although case studies have the objective of generalizing from small samples, the case company which has been analysed can be an outlier making the results less applicable to be recommended to other organizations. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct further research on multiple case studies in different industries and organizations to look for similarities and differences.

Secondly, this research could be limited by the case that is has been conducted by one researcher only. As it is a qualitative study, the results are likely to be biased because of subjectivity of the researcher. Unfortunately, there was no possibility to increase the validity of the coding as well as the interpretation of the coding. The steps of Braun & Clarke (2006), a coding format, for doing a thematic analysis have been followed to attempt to make the results as reliable as possible.

Thirdly, the fact that this research is conducted by a single researcher also effects the translations within the research. Translations of the interviews and some company documents had to be made. It is plausible that certain language nuances may be lost in translation.

Future Research

This research offers a few opportunities for future research. First of all, it became clear that the fact that HouseGoods is a family business is an important factor/motivation why the company wants to be sustainable, which also makes

the motivation of the CEO to be sustainable legitimate. It might be interesting for future research to also conduct case studies on business without a family history to verify if the CEO is still as important in the transition. Next to that, future research could perform a similar study but in different contexts (other industries, smaller or larger companies, different countries, et cetera). Tirth, this research explored organizational sustainability narratives and their impact on the sustainability transition and the organizational identity of companies. But still, there is a lot more research required. Until now this is one of the only studies focussing on organizational sustainability narratives, and the only one naming pillars of an organizational sustainability narrative and its influence on the organizational identity. A deeper understanding on how these pillars affect the transition and the organizational identity could be explored in the future. A deeper understanding can greatly benefit the success rate of companies that are becoming sustainable.

APPENDIX I: Interview questions

1. Can you tell me something about yourself and your function within this company?
2. When and how did the organization shift towards a more sustainable business model?
3. What are/were the drivers for the organization to shift towards the more sustainable business model?
4. Can you tell me shortly what the company stood for before the change?
5. What are the new norms, values and beliefs of the company after it changed towards a more sustainable business model?
6. What kind of narratives did exist during the period of change?

   Tip: Think about stories that were being told, topics that were addressed explicitly, logos, occurring themes in newsletters and other things that might helped to facilitate the change.
7. Who are in your eyes the narrators of the organizational narratives?
8. Did you feel that the narratives helped you to identify more with the new norms, values and beliefs of the company?

   If yes: How, which ones did, and which ones did not?
9. Did you feel that the narratives helped other employees to identify more with the new norms, values and beliefs of the company?

   If yes: How, which ones did, and which ones did not?

Anonymized

Last additional question:

10. Can you give me any type of materials, documents, newsletters or emails, for example concerning the topics we talked about that might be relevant for my research?

APPENDIX II: Interview protocol

Short description research

In this research is about organizational narratives and how these narratives can help the organization to become more sustainable. Narratives are understood as means by which an organization is told and performed. Narratives can include talk and text but also people, machines, technologies, architectures, naturally occurring entities, processes visuals and audios. All these narratives can help us understand how the organization evolved/changed towards a more sustainable business and how its actors shaped this evolution.

Short description interview questions

The interview questions are mainly about how you experienced the change of company X towards becoming more sustainable. We would like to get insights in how you experienced the narratives in that period of time. Feel free to supplement to my questions if you feel there is information that is important to be told, or ask questions if you do not understand. Next to that, you do not need to answer the interview questions if you do not want to and you can stop the interview at any time.

After the interview, the transcript will be shared with you for verification. You will have to opportunity to make alterations to the transcript if you please.

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