Sustainability program brands: Platforms for collaboration and co-creation

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ABSTRACT

While CSR and sustainability have been widely debated topics over the past decades, there is still evidence of unethical practices by businesses, as witnessed through corporate scandals across a number of industry sectors. This highlights the need for firms to collaborate to actively prevent malpractices and instead find ways to improve standards along the whole value chain. With the increased pressure from various stakeholders, calling for firms to address these issues in a collaborative and holistic manner, the development of models facilitating collaboration is vital. Taking a communication perspective, this paper seeks to improve the knowledge on how organisations can manage diverse stakeholders to improve value chain collaboration towards more sustainable practices. Based on a multiple case study methodology, involving in-depth interviews with senior directors in the food and drink value chain, a framework is developed, depicting the value of a branded sustainability program as a useful platform for stimulating collaboration and co-creation from diverse and/or competing stakeholders. The framework builds on, and contributes to several literature strands including CSR/sustainability communication, coopetition and branding.

1. Introduction

In order to ensure that unsustainable practices are being addressed in a holistic manner, firms adhering to a corporate sustainability or CSR strategy must take a wider responsibility and collaborate with stakeholders along the entire value chain (Cruz & Boehe, 2008; Spence & Bourlakis, 2009; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Lindgreen, Xu, Maon, & Wilcock, 2012; Crane, Palazzo, Spence, & Matten, 2014; Czinkota, Kaufmann, & Basile, 2014; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014). Collaboration should ideally take the form of co-creation to strengthen the relationships and ensure that a societal impact is made with shared value for all stakeholders involved (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013; Biggemann, Williams, & Kro, 2014; Dentoni, Bitzer, & Pascucc, 2015).

Collaboration and co-creation is, however, sometimes challenged as the value chain members might have varying degrees of interest and capability to collaborate and co-create, and might also have conflicting objectives as they might simultaneously be in competition and in collaboration with each other, a phenomenon termed coopetition (Afuah, 2004; Bengtsson & Kock, 2014; Ritala, Golnam, & Wegmann, 2014; Yami & Nemeh, 2014). Firms will need to carefully manage relationships

with their stakeholders to ensure that collaborative efforts are not jeopardised by tension following the competitive elements of the relations and the academic literature offers some limited insights into coopetition management strategies to address this peril (for example Dowling, Roering, Carlin, & Wisnieski, 1996; Chin, Chan, & Lam, 2008; Tidström, 2014; Fernandez, Le Roy, & Gnyawali, 2014; LaPlaca, 2014).

While the majority of the above-mentioned papers on coopetition management deals with the management of the tension on its own, Chin et al. (2008) take a more integrated approach, searching management techniques that not only address the tension but also encourage collaboration. Based on a quantitative empirical study, they suggest that the critical success factors for managing a coopetition strategy include, in order of importance: management commitment, relationship development, and communication management. We argue, however, that communication perhaps plays the most important role, as it should be seen as the foundation for the former two factors, as communication is a key tool for senior management to achieve their vision (Polonsky, 1996; Gregory, 2007), and a fundamental aspect of forming business relationships (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000; Grönroos, 2004). Also the business ethics literature promotes well-managed communication as a prerequisite for successful stakeholder management and the accomplishment of CSR objectives (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005; Andriof & Waddock, 2002; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010).

There is however very limited knowledge on what communication management entails. How should communication be designed in order to not only appeal to a diverse audience but also to encourage

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stakeholders with competing interests to collaborate and co-create on sustainability issues? What communication strategies can assist in developing healthy collaboration in a competitive context with the aim of driving the sustainability agenda across the value chain? The calls for increased understanding of the role of communication to facilitate collaboration and co-creation are not limited to the coopetition literature. Also the CSR/sustainability communication literature is seeking contributions to this area (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Du et al., 2010; Scandelius & Cohen, 2011; Blomback & Scandelius, 2013).

Consultation of the PR and corporate communication literature helps to shed some light onto this area. Balanced two-way communication strategies, where the firm and its stakeholders are seen as equal partners, have been suggested to promote collaboration and co-creation (Grunig and Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Gregory, 2007). It is, however, reported that there is still a relatively low uptake on fully symmetric communication between firms and their stakeholders (Grunig and Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), which could be an effect of the relatively limited knowledge on what constitutes such a communication strategy.

With this in mind, this paper aims at increasing the understanding of how firms can design balanced two-way communication strategies on CSR/sustainability[1] (taking a focal[2] organisation's perspective) that facilitate collaboration and co-creation with diverse stakeholders. In order to fulfil this aim two research objectives are developed:

- RO1: To explore with which stakeholders businesses are practicing two-way symmetric sustainability communication, and the drivers behind this.
- RO2: To explore how this two-way communication can be designed to facilitate collaboration and co-creation with stakeholders.

This research thus contributes to the CSR/sustainability communication literature, where there have been calls for increasing knowledge on how to effectively communicate with stakeholders to stimulate collaboration and co-creation (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing et al., 2008; Du et al., 2010; Scandelius & Cohen, 2011; Blomback & Scandelius, 2013). While some of the findings might also be applicable to the broader communication literature, we cannot claim any generalisation beyond the CSR/sustainability communication literature.

In addition this research expands knowledge in coopetition, which hitherto has been limited to seller and buyer relationships and lacks clear direction on what a communication strategy comprises. It also adds to the branding literature, as the findings reveal that a branded sustainability program can act as a useful communication platform to the wider stakeholder community, and can stimulate collaboration and co-creation among various stakeholders on sustainability initiatives. Finally, this research offers practical value, as it can inspire practitioners to build effective communication strategies on CSR/sustainability initiatives, which can benefit also the wider society.

Section 2 will highlight the theoretical foundation for this research. This is followed by a description of the qualitative methodology applied to fulfil the research objectives. Based on the findings, a framework is developed, followed by a discussion on how the emerging evidence compares and contrasts to previous academic knowledge in the area.

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[1] Inline with a number of prominent scholars (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Jose and Lee, 2007; Moon, 2007; Sotorrio, Sanchez, & Fernandez, 2008; Perez-Batres, Miller, & Pisani, 2010; Lourenco, Branco, Curto, & Eugenio, 2012) we make the assumption that the concepts of CSR and sustainability, while not identical, can be used interchangeably as: "… these concepts are considered to address the same basic issues, in the sense that they all are about companies' impacts on, relationships with, and responsibilities to, society" (Lourenco et al., 2012:417). Sustainability/CSR will in this paper comprise Elkington's (1998) three pillars of social, environmental and economic responsibilities.

[2] While communication between organisations and their stakeholders can and possibly should be viewed from a network perspective with the firm and stakeholders simultaneously participating in several networks (Roloff, 2007; Rowley, 1997; Neville & Menguc, 2006), this research will, for practical purposes, consider communication from a focal organisation's perspective.

Finally concluding remarks will be made, with suggestions for future research and recommendations to practitioners on how to best apply CSR/sustainability communication practices to the stakeholders with whom they need to collaborate.

2. Literature review

2.1. Coopetition management to stimulate collaboration and co-creation

As mentioned in the introduction, the implementation and management of a sustainability strategy can be hampered by malfunctioning coopetition between the firm and its stakeholders. Coopetition, which is defined as a context where a firm and its suppliers, customers and other key stakeholders simultaneously compete and cooperate (Afuah, 2004; Bengtsson & Kock, 2014), can take the format of horizontal coopetition, where competing firms seek collaboration (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999, 2000), but also through the less explored vertical coopetition with, for example, suppliers and customers (Lacoste, 2012). On this note it should be highlighted that some stakeholders might possess several identities across different contexts and might thus be in both horizontal and vertical coopetition (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). It has also been suggested that even within a stakeholder group negative and positive emotions about the coopetition might coexist (Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Kock, 2014), posing further challenges. The risk for tension or even conflict with such a diverse stakeholder picture is significant, and it is vital for firms to find ways to manage these relationships productively to put a focus on the collaborative aspects. On this note it is suggested that collaboration should ideally take the form of co-creation with the active participation of relevant stakeholders to strengthen the relationships and ensure that a societal impact is made with shared value for all stakeholders involved (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ind et al., 2013; Biggemann et al., 2014; Dentoni et al., 2015). Co-creation is here viewed as collaboration with higher involvement and creativity leading to shared value, as seen in the following definition:

> "An active, creative, and social process based on collaboration between organisations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders."

> (Ind et al., 2013: 9)

Coopetition management thus faces the balancing act of harnessing the competitive aspect whilst simultaneously encouraging the active participation of the relevant stakeholders. The academic literature on coopetition management, however, frequently takes a narrower approach, focusing primarily on the management of the tension (Lacoste, 2012; Fernandez et al., 2014; Tidström, 2014). While Tidström (2014) recommends 'avoidance management' to deal with tensions, Lacoste (2012) offers a slightly more integrated approach, advising management of the continuum between conflicting interests to mutual benefits through either strengthening the existing relationship basis, or correcting it by changing the relationship to either more cooperative or competitive, or finally to commute the relationship into the other extreme of the continuum. Lacoste's study is limited to the relationships between buyers and sellers, and does not take into account the multitude of relationships that may co-exist between a firm and its other stakeholders. In addition, while the notions on 'strengthening', 'correcting' or 'commuting' the relationships contribute to an improved understanding of vertical coopetition; their model does not explain how these relational strategies can be practically applied.

Chin et al. (2008) take a more integrated approach in their exploration of the critical success factors for managing coopetition. They identify three success factor categories: management commitment, relationship development, and communication management. Management commitment includes, for example, the firm's vision and mission, long-term strategy, resource allocation, and importantly involvement and motivation of employees. With regards to relationship development, trust is

highlighted as essential and can be created, for example, through finding common goals and in respecting the different corporate cultures between organisations. The factor of communication management includes the development of corporate communication strategies to internal and external stakeholders and the coordination of managing the flow of information, and emphasises the importance of "information system support" and "conflict management systems". While the findings promote a formalised process into conflict handling based on a quantitative study, the study fails to give explicit details on how to design communication strategies to resolve these conflicts. In addition, while communication is viewed by Chin et al. (2008) as one of three success factors, we argue that communication underpins the other two factors, i.e. management commitment and relationship development (Polonsky, 1996; Gregory, 2007; Olkkonen et al., 2000; Grönroos, 2004; Maignan et al., 2005; Andriof & Waddock, 2002; Du et al., 2010). Communication that is continuous, objective and timely is further suggested as the most critical relational mechanism in B2B interactions (Kaufmann, Czinkota, & Zakrzewski, 2015).

The coopetition literature, whilst growing in interest and research output, still offers limited understanding on the communication aspect of coopetitive relationships, and specifically in the context of CSR and sustainability. How can these relationships be managed through communication? What communication strategies can assist in developing healthy collaboration in a competitive context with the aim of driving the sustainability agenda across the value chain?

In order to answer these questions, this paper will study the management of coopetition (with a particular focus on the collaborative aspect) on sustainability initiatives through the lens of corporate communication, thereby contributing to both a communication perspective of this dilemma and to coopetition on a corporate level, including also relationships to the wider stakeholder community. The following sections will now address this communication angle regarding managing stakeholder relationships so as to encourage collaboration and co-creation.

2.2. Corporate communication model for enhanced collaboration and co-creation

Corporate communication is defined as the management function of communication between an organisation and its stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2005). Its three objectives include: (1) maintaining favourable relationships with its stakeholders; (2) actively evaluating and adapting to societal trends; and (3) the integration of all communication to portray a coherent image of the organisation (Illia & Balmer, 2012). The first two objectives resemble the aims of coopetition management, and are highly relevant for the management of a CSR and sustainability strategy. To fulfil these objectives the corporate communication literature suggests tools such as the use of public relations (PR) (Illia & Balmer, 2012). Grunig and Hunt introduced a PR communication model in 1984, depicting four communication strategies ranging from a press agentry strategy, characterised by one-way communication taking the form of propaganda, through to what they describe as a fully symmetric two-way communication model based on mutual understanding and equality between the sender and receiver of communication. This symmetric communication model, seeks a dialogue with its audience, and the firm is here prepared to change as much as it expects its audience to be prepared to change (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

As a CSR/sustainability strategy with a holistic value chain approach calls for closer and active collaboration with stakeholders (Balmer, Fukukawa, & Gray, 2007; Spence & Bourlakis, 2009; Du et al., 2010), one would assume, based on the thinking of Grunig and Hunt (1984), that a symmetric two-way communication strategy would be most suitable, as it proactively involves stakeholders. This notion is supported by a number of industrial marketing scholars; for example Kaufmann et al. (2015) suggest that asymmetric relationships pose a threat to collaboration, and that instead mutual communication and joint problem solving are the vital ingredients in functioning relationships (Szczepanski &

Swiatowiec-Szczepanska, 2012; Sanchez Bengoa, Czinkota, Kaufmann, & Schrader, 2015). Symmetric relationships are best supported by symmetric communication leading to the dynamic involvement and participation of coopetition actors so as to co-create a successful outcome (Lindström & Polsa, 2015).

The Grunig and Hunt (1984) is indeed proposed as a starting point for CSR communication by Morsing and Schultz (2006), and viewing CSR communication strategies from a sense-giving and sense-making perspective, they highlight that a two-way symmetric strategy, which they name 'the stakeholder involvement strategy', encourages stakeholders to participate in the formation of corporate actions in relation to sustainability. This approach is described as an iterative process of sense-making and sense-giving, where.

> "…companies engage frequently and systematically in dialogue with their stakeholders in order to explore mutually beneficial action — assuming that both parties involved in the dialogue are willing to change."

> (Morsing and Schultz, 2006: 328)

Despite the promotion of symmetric dialogue for sustainability communication in the academic literature, there is still limited evidence of this communication strategy being practiced. Morsing and Schultz (2006) find, for example, limited opportunities for stakeholders to feed back communication, with one of their case companies, Novo Nordisk, being one exception — a company where stakeholders write commentaries in their CSR reports. Morsing and Schultz here argue that by inviting external stakeholders to comment, admittedly still controlled by the corporation, there is a channel for stakeholders to introduce new issues for the corporation to address. Their paper concludes that perhaps there are no real examples of true two-way symmetric communication, but that several companies are striving in that direction. Morsing and Schultz stress that "CSR is a moving target" (2006: 336), meaning that stakeholder expectations are continuously changing, and corporations therefore need to be prepared to respond accordingly. Dialogic communication with stakeholders is therefore vital.

With the indication above of a narrow uptake by corporations to adopt symmetric communication, the aim of research objective 1 is to gain an understanding on the current situation, as the work by Morsing et al. (2008) and by Grunig and Hunt (1984) are fairly dated. In addition, research objective 1 seeks to establish the motives behind the application of symmetric communication to further the understanding of this communication strategy.

While the communication literature promotes symmetric two-way communication to stimulate active participation of stakeholders it doesn't detail what a two-way symmetric sustainability communication model entails, and this is the rationale behind research objective 2. We consult the branding literature, as it offers some insights on how to design two-way symmetric communication to encourage co-creation, and the following section will review those ideas. The branding literature is of particular interest as it emerged during the data collection that a sustainability program brand is considered a vital communication management strategy to strengthen relationships and promote active co-creation within the stakeholder network.

2.3. Symmetric communication and co-creation from a branding perspective

The branding literature is an interesting source for ideas on co-creation and collaboration with stakeholders, with the notion of the contemporary view of brands as dynamic and social processes between the brands and all their stakeholders (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Biraghi & Gambetti, 2013), which is not dissimilar from a sustainability context. Ind et al. (2013) highlight the importance of making participation central in the brand experience through the two-way exchange between the organisation and its stakeholders. This leads to a higher tendency

for participants to consider themselves as an integral part of the brand and increases their willingness to actively contribute their creativity and ideas for innovation.

In the context of corporate brand development, Gregory (2007) illustrates the stakeholder engagement process as a spiral, where the brands's core values are continuously reviewed and refined in an iterative progression. A balanced dialogic communication strategy, named 'partner strategy', characterised by "full engagement, open dialogue and a relationship based on peer respect and equality" (Gregory 2007: 67), is proposed for stakeholders that are powerful and interested in collaboration and co-creation. Communication to this stakeholder group needs to be two-way (symmetric) to build trust, an element that was also highlighted as important by Ind et al. (2013) and in the coopetition literature (Chin et al., 2008). Gregory (2007) warns however that too much stakeholder involvement can be very time consuming and can lead to a more confused picture, and that the role of corporate communicators is complex and requires deep analysis and management of the continuously evolving stakeholder community. There is also the perceived risk of stakeholders becoming too close to corporations and consequently liable to lose their objectivity (Crane & Matten, 2010), or the risk of transparent communication being exploited by competitors (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

Hatch and Schultz (2010) address the challenge of transparency in brand co-creation in their longitudinal case study of the Lego Group and its brand community, but stress that despite risks related to transparency, stakeholder engagement (through dialogue and access) brings several benefits to the organisation, from better understanding of its stakeholders' needs, to finding ways to co-create and build value with various stakeholder groups. It is admitted that the study is limited to consumers, and further research is called for to understand the co-creation process with other stakeholders, such as NGOs.

Another example of positive outcomes from coopetition through brand co-creation is offered by Lemmetyinen and Go (2010) in their empirical case study of the cruise sector, exploring collaboration to co-create a network brand of Cruise Baltic's destinations. Their research illustrates how such relationships evolve, and the relevant phases in this collaboration are identified. Importantly it is found that a vital step in this process occurs when the participants realise the benefits of the collaborative brand project as also helping their individual brand-building activities.

These examples indicate that symmetrical communication through a brand could bring several benefits with mutual value creation through a sense of co-ownership among stakeholders. These notions could therefore provide some interesting input to address research objective 2.

This section has reviewed the existing literature on coopetition and symmetrical communication, highlighting the importance of extending the knowledge in this area and to find methods to overcome the challenges identified. The research objectives as presented in the introduction have the potential to fill some of these research gaps. The next section will explain the research methodology that was conducted in order to accomplish these research objectives.

3. Methodology

The context for this research is the food and drink value chain, specifically focusing on Western European retailers, food/drink manufacturers, and some of their stakeholders. Recent scandals in the food and drink supply chain (Wiese & Toporowski, 2013; Czinkota et al., 2014) emphasise the necessity for actors in this value chain to collaborate to actively prevent malpractices and instead find ways to improve ethical standards along the whole chain. Wiese and Toporowski (2013) for example highlight the special sustainability related challenges in this industry, from the diversity of origin of products due to climate and cost differences between various geographical regions, to the vast number of companies involved in the

chain. The food and drink value chain thus poses as a very interesting context for the research of sustainability communication practices aimed at stimulating collaboration..

As the literature search reveals relatively limited understandings on sustainability communication aimed at stimulating collaboration, an inductive research approach was considered as the appropriate method. Thus the aim was to develop theory based on evidence collected through primary and secondary research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). A qualitative methodology was chosen as it is recommended when a phenomenon that is not well known needs to be explored in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Saunders et al., 2012). Specifically a multiple case study research methodology was applied following the research framework by Yin (2009). By including more than one case, richer theory can be developed that may also improve the chances for generalisation, compared to a single case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009).

3.1. Sampling

The multiple-case design was employed including 20 organisations (retailers, food/drink manufacturers, stakeholders), permitting the comparison and contrasting of sustainability communication practices. The inclusion of two steps within the food and drink value chain (manufacturers and retailers), as well as some of their key stakeholders (trade organisations and a not-for profit governmental organisation) also allowed for verification from both the communicating organisation's perspective as well as from a selection of stakeholders receiving the messages (Yin, 2009). The organisations selected for the study were those that are actively leading or participating in collaborative work on sustainability with stakeholders. Within these organisations, those senior managers/directors directly involved in formulating the organisation's sustainability communication strategy were identified.

The sample selection technique applied was non-probability sampling, and the specific techniques were convenience sampling, utilising the authors' existing network, combined with snowball sampling deriving from the convenience sampled respondents.

3.2. Data collection

The data collection was carried out in two phases during the period from June 2011 to April 2012 (see Table 1). As a first step, a field study including in-depth interviews with senior managers/directors in the 20 organisations was conducted. Originally it was thought that these interviews would provide sufficient data to fulfil the research objectives. During analysis of the collected data (see details below in Section 3.3) it was, noticed that sustainability program brands are viewed as a prominent strategic communication tool for stakeholder management. Following this discovery, a second phase of data collection was carried out in order to deepen the understanding of these program brands. This second phase of data collection was conducted by executing in-depth case

Table 1
Step-by-step data collection and analysis process.

Phase 1
1. Interviews in 20 case companies.
2. Analysis of transcripts from the interviews and website content:
   a) Within-case analysis;
   b) Cross-case analysis.
3. Findings: RO1 fulfilled; discovery of branded sustainability programs as a tool for symmetric communication.
Phase 2
1. In order to further explore the discovery of sustainability program brands further data collection followed from 6 of the case companies, through:
   a) Further interviews;
   b) Observation of stakeholder forum.
2. Analysis of transcripts, followed by further within-case and cross-case analyses.
3. Findings: RO2 fulfilled

studies of six of the organisations (see Table 2), selected because of their relatively long experience of sustainability program brands, or in one case (Case 3) a very proactive application of the branded program. These case studies involved further interviews of senior directors in the selected organisations, and an observation of a sustainability forum where case company 3 sought feedback from stakeholders (NGOs, industry colleagues, suppliers, experts, etc.) to their branded sustainability program.

Following Yin (2009), a case database was created, utilising multiple sources of data including the interview and observation transcripts; and also content from the websites of the case companies.

3.3. Data analysis

Once the first phase of data collection was completed, each interview transcript was analysed by applying thematic coding. "Coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis" (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 593), and is a useful tool as it helps to identify what different items of data represent and to categorise each item of data and compare and connect to theoretical ideas. The coding system used in this research was originally based on the research objectives, adding and removing constructs following an iterative process. A number of categories (tree nodes) were thus developed to categorise the interview data into a more manageable structure. Firstly, each case was analysed separately and a case report was completed for each case company. This was followed by a cross-case analysis, comparing and contrasting the findings to gain a rich understanding of the organisations' sustainability communication strategies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009).

Finally, as the last step, the rich data deriving from interviews, forum observation, and website communication of the six case organisation, was analysed applying the same analysis technique as for the first phase, but applying a modified and refined coding structure (Yin, 2009).

3.4. Validity and reliability

In order to achieve good reliability, validity and to avoid bias, a number of precautions were taken, following advice from Saunders et al. (2012):

- One researcher conducted all interviews.
- A list of standard questions was sent to the respondents prior to the interview.

- The interviews were recorded and transcribed.
- A conscious effort was made to ensure equal weighting for all respondents when analysing the data.
- All respondents were selected to ensure as similar seniority and expertise as possible in the field of sustainability communication to further strengthen the comparability of cases.

In addition, the quality of the research is further improved by the inclusion of multiple cases and sources, ensuring triangulation (Yin, 2009).

The findings emerging from the analysis are presented in the next section, followed by a discussion section where the developing framework is discussed in depth.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings from the interviews indicate the stakeholders most likely to enjoy two-way symmetric communication with a food/drink retailer or manufacturer include employees (suggested by 14 cases), followed by strategically important suppliers (9 cases), and in collaboration with industry colleagues through forums and roundtables (9 cases). It emerges that the employment of sustainability program brands creates the foundation for two-way symmetric communication, enabling diverse stakeholders to engage with each other and the focal organisation, leading to knowledge sharing, innovation, collaborative power, and co-creation, which has the potential to bring progress in sustainable development. The findings are illustrated in Fig. 1, with further explanation and evidence offered in the sections below and summarised in Table 3.

The text that follows is structured in subsections, the first of which presents and discusses the findings related to stakeholders that are targeted with two-way symmetrical communication and the motives for this (as per Research Objective 1). Next, the design of this communication so as to facilitate collaboration and co-creation with the stakeholder groups is detailed (as per Research Objective 2). The presentation of findings is further discussed in relation to previous relevant academic research, and the impact of these new understandings is stated.

4.1. Symmetrical communication to employees, suppliers and industry colleagues

Starting at the centre of Fig. 1, it is found that firms (retailers and food/drink manufacturers) primarily consider three stakeholder groups with whom to exercise symmetric two-way communication (symbolised by double arrows in Fig. 1), i.e. employees, suppliers, and industry colleagues.

Table 2
An overview of the six case companies with sustainability program brands.

| Value chain position	Turnover 2011, million £	Respondent position	Year when brand was established	Program brand alias
Case 1				
Retailer	1500	(1) Chairman (2) Head of environment	2007	Brand A
Case 2				
Retailer	9900	(1) Chairman, (2) Head of climate change (3) Head of sustainable business	2006	Brand B
Case 3				
Brand owner	8284	(1) Chairman and CEO (2) Head of stakeholder engagement and CR (3) Head of UK recycling	2011	Brand C
Case 4				
Trade organisation for retailers	n.a.	(1) Head of environment and chair of communication at product sustainability forum	2008	Brand D
Case 5				
Trade organisation for food/drink manufacturers	n.a.	(1) Director of communication (2) Environment policy manager	2007	Brand E
Case 6				
Non-profit organisation for reducing waste	n.a.	(1) Head of food and drinks program	2005	Brand F
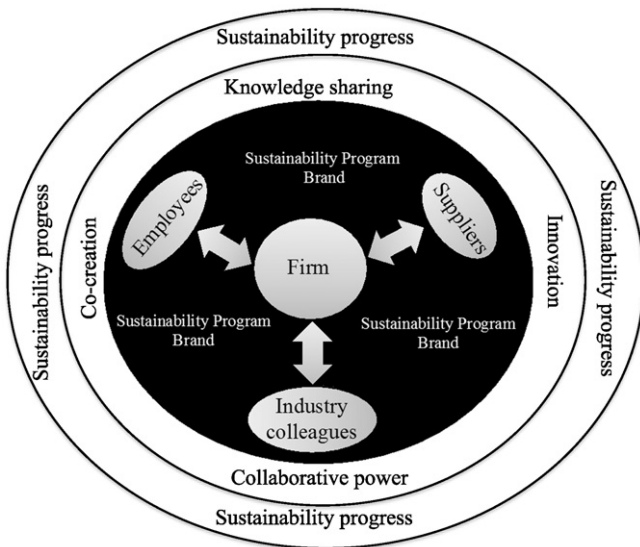
Fig. 1. Framework for corporate sustainability communication to stimulate collaboration.

The primary drivers for two-way balanced communication with these stakeholders are: to achieve co-creation, innovation, knowledge and experience sharing, and to gain collaborative power to be able to exert pressure on governments/regulators to make sustainability progress while keeping the industry sector competitive. This will be discussed in more detail for each of the three stakeholder groups in the subsections below.

4.1.1. Communication to employees

In the case of communication with employees, the underlying rationale for a balanced communication strategy is the importance of these stakeholders for the execution of the firm's sustainability agenda, and their interface with customers. Activities to empower employees include appointing internal sustainability champions, issuing rewards for sustainability initiatives, formalising sustainability aspects in all development work, and incorporating sustainability initiatives as a part of evaluating managers' performance. Importantly, several case companies appoint sustainability champions from various functions within the organisation, whose task is to stimulate and encourage initiatives and innovation, and to channel feedback between the environmental management team and other members of staff across the organisation.

By involving, for example, employees in the sustainability strategy, an increased sense of co-ownership and loyalty to the organisation might be achieved (Gregory, 2007; Bolton, Kim, & O'Gormann, 2011) which can contribute to an improved level of engagement and advances in internal procedures, and to some extent also in external procedures through the employees being the 'face' of the organisation to external stakeholders. A case study of a multinational energy firm emphasises that a firm's sustainability strategy must firstly be fully established with its internal stakeholders before co-creation with external stakeholders can take place in an effective manner, and that:

> "…as co-creators of the CSR brand, employees allow the brand to be placed and interpreted in local contexts, thus ensuring a direct appeal to both global and local external and internal stakeholders."
>
> (Bolton et al., 2011: 70)

This inside-out approach is also proposed by Morsing et al. (2008), who stress the importance of employees as sustainability ambassadors.

While many of the respondents in this study praise the value of two-way communication with employees, there are also indications of some drawbacks. For example some evidence suggests that true

balanced two-way communications are primarily applied on a managerial level, whereas junior employees are expected to comply with the sustainability strategy as put forward by senior staff. This could possibly be due to a lack of sufficient knowledge and/or authority for more junior members of staff to actively drive and participate in co-creation. In order for a firm to successfully implement a sustainability strategy it is thus important to not only develop the overall internal organisational capacity, but also to provide individual employees with the required knowledge, authority and tools to enable them to co-create (Rama, Milano, Salas, & Liu, 2009).

4.1.2. Communication to suppliers

While several of the retailers suggest that communication to key suppliers will take a symmetric approach, some evidence rather points towards imbalanced communication, as many suppliers expressed during interviews that they feel that communication from retailers can be quite dictatorial and does not really invite a balanced dialogue.

There is nevertheless one context where the relationship between suppliers and manufacturers seems to take a more symmetric approach, and that is when the aim of the communication is to stimulate innovation. Supplier summits are suggested as a useful tool to get suppliers to share experiences and work together to improve practices, as is expressed below on the website of Case 3:

> "In 2010, we held our first-ever Supplier Sustainability Summit, attended by representatives from 50 of our top suppliers to discuss our goals, targets and the ways we can work together. This meeting demonstrated our commitment to CRS to our supply chain and created an opening for innovation and collaborative dialogue. The meeting helped us develop a number of key CRS [Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability] projects."

It is likely that these close and balanced relationships prosper, as the participating actors have identified dual benefits from collaboration (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010).

Close communication to suppliers is vital for any firm wishing to apply a value chain approach to their sustainability strategy, as it is essential to take a holistic view to implement more sustainable practices (Cruz & Boehe, 2008; Spence & Bourlakis, 2009; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Lindgreen et al., 2012; Crane et al., 2014; Czinkota et al., 2014). Firms also need to better understand the strengths and limitations of their suppliers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

4.1.3. Communication to industry colleagues

The third stakeholder category enjoying symmetric communication is that of industry colleagues. Several of the larger companies and trade organisations suggest that close interaction with industry colleagues takes place through forums and roundtables linked to branded initiatives, and that this is a successful method to meet and collaborate on equal and non-competitive terms, which is more likely to enable positive change from a holistic perspective. The challenge here is to find the correct balance of competition and collaboration, as suggested in the following citations that took place at the sustainability forum initiated by case company 3:

> "We have to collaborate but I fundamentally believe, and I think [Chairman and CEO, case company 3] referenced it before, we need diversity of competition in there as well."
>
> (Case 2: Head of sustainable business)

> "How very interesting, I was at a meeting yesterday with someone working in another sector and his observation was 'when did leading edge become bleeding edge?' and both [Chairman and CEO, Case 3] and [Head of sustainable business, Case 2] have mentioned this need to kind of blend, where is the crossover between competition and collaboration; and when I was in South Africa earlier this year, they were

Table 3
Explanation and evidence relating to Fig. 1.

Symbol/construct	Description	Evidence/comments
Central inner circle (1st level of circle)	Firm as focal organisation.	The research is based on a focal firm's perspective.
Double arrows to employees, suppliers and industry colleagues	Arrows symbolise two-way symmetric communication.	The interviews reveal that two-way symmetric communication is targeted to primarily three stakeholder groups: employees; strategically important suppliers; and in collaboration with industry colleagues through forums and roundtables. E.g. in Case 3 the Chair and CEO explain the rationale behind their sustainability program brand:
Sustainability program brand as the construct symbolised by the black circle (2nd level circle)	Sustainability program brand acts as a vehicle for two-way symmetrical communication, both through communicating facts and by encouraging participation.	"… I think they are two different components, one of them is setting targets and really thinking what those targets need to be and then the second one is being able to explain them both internally and externally very simplistically […], and so when we went through all the different components of reducing our carbon footprint, one of the things we realised, is that we needed a way to really get everyone's emotional alignment into this…"
3rd level of circle	Represents outcomes from symmetrical communication through sustainability program brand.	Respondents report key outcomes as: co-creation; knowledge sharing; innovation; collaborative power. Case 2 — Head of sustainable business comments on co-creation with other retailers through Brand D (Case 4):
Co-creation	A sustainability program brand can allow flexibility and different interpretations, promoting collaboration and co-creation even between competitors.	"…trying to create a common language, a common approach to measuring carbon, measuring water, measuring impacts on the supply chain, […] there's no point in Tesco, M&S, Sainsbury's having different languages." Case 3 — Head of stakeholder engagement and CR:
Knowledge sharing	Collaboration on the sustainability program brand allows sharing best practices.	"We recognize that there are many suppliers that are very sophisticated on the carbon reduction journeys but equally we've got many suppliers, like we were six years ago, that are at the beginning of their carbon reduction journey and that's where we are very determined to collaborate and also to share what we've learned…" Case 2 — Head of climate change:
Innovation	It is reported that a sustainability program brand allows flexibility and different interpretations that can stimulate innovation, both collaborative and individual within a stakeholder group.	"Now that's specifically up to them to make measurable progress, but it's also general enough to allow a lot of innovation in the different categories to decide what is the right attribute for their category." Case 4 — Head of environment comments on Brand F (of Case 6):
Collaborative power	Collaborative power can be achieved through collaboration with stakeholders through the branded program.	"So all of the retailers are going to want to go their own way but the collaborative piece can be really, really effective so some of the programs, the work that we've got with [Case 6] for example, [Brand F]… now you can get much more effective work and much more effective messages if you work together." For example Case 4 — Head of environment comments on Brand F (of Case 6):
4th level of circle	Represents the final outcome from the firm's interaction with its stakeholders through the sustainability program brand: Sustainability progress.	"Not only have we got a better figure of how many bags are used across the UK we've also got a really good handle on how that figure has come down over the last five years. So we would not have been able to do that, again packaging, there are all sorts of first mover disadvantages, reducing your packaging when your competitors are not but if we all worked together under [Brand F] then we can make progress together."

talking about that in a very animated way as the group of FMCG companies and they were saying 'we need to come up with a new word that reflects what we are doing now and it's something like "collabation"' cause it's partly one and partly the other; and companies right now are really feeling that way in this space about what that means between 'you need to collaborate in some areas' and then actually towards the end, you are going back down into competition, so how to really work this and it's something that is a journey to work all way through."(Sustainability forum participant — Senior associate of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership)

The strategy applied for these industry-wide initiative contexts are described as fully balanced two-way communication. The respondents suggest that participation in these forums is an excellent source for learning from others, and for gaining collaborative power to lobby with governments, with the ultimate aim of keeping the industry sector competitive. This is in line with previous research suggesting that collaboration within a competitive environment is facilitated when participants can identify benefits from collaboration (Luo, Slotegraaf, & Pan, 2006; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010; Huang & Yu, 2011; Li, Liu, & Liu, 2011;

Song & Lee, 2012). One could, however, question the priority of the sustainability agenda in these settings, as many respondents would first mention the value of these forums for keeping the industry sector or value chain competitive.

4.2. Designing two-way communication to facilitate collaboration and co-creation

The previous section gives evidence on the three key stakeholder groups benefitting from two-way symmetrical communication, and the motives behind this, thus explaining the background to the inner three circles of Fig. 1. A key element of circle 2 is, however, the notion of sustainability program brands (symbolised as a platform of the black circle). The respondents suggest that in order to successfully achieve the outcomes of circle 3 (knowledge sharing, innovation, co-creation and collaborative power), branding can be applied to stimulate engagement in contexts of diverse and/or competitive stakeholder conditions.

The employment of sustainability program brands emerged as an interesting and important aspect of designing a sustainability communication strategy, as these brands can act as a vehicle for sustainability

communication to a variety of stakeholders. The brands can be either company created sustainability program brands (e.g. Brands A, B and C as depicted in Table 2), or brands initiated by trade organisations or other similar organisations (Brands E, F and G in Table 2). The application of sustainability program brands has been implemented by a number of corporations both in the food and drink industry, as well as in a range of other industry sectors, e.g. 'Plan A' by M&S, 'The Sustainable Living Plan' by Unilever, and '20 × 20 Sustainability Plan' by Sainsbury, to mention but a few.

The respondents in this study reveal that a branded program offers a number of benefits including simplification of the complex topic of sustainability, flexibility in interpretation, emotional attachment, and consistency of communication. In terms of simplification, the sustainability program brand typically includes general statements of the overall sustainability ethos, which can be understood even without deeper technical knowledge on sustainability, as suggested in the quote below by the head of environment in Case 1.

"... even if you don't quite understand everything that [Brand A] stands for, as long as they understand the general ethos of what it's trying to achieve and I think it then works really well".

The general statement of overall sustainability aim or mission of the program also allows stakeholders to find their own interpretation of how to best achieve this mission, giving them certain flexibility regarding where and how to take action. This allows the stakeholders to choose the communication content that is most applicable to their needs and interests, and therefore eases the challenge of communicating to a complex or diverse audience.

In the case of sustainability champions, whose role is to implement the sustainability ethos across the organisation, the branded program with its possibility for individual interpretations can thereby reduce the risk of conflicts. The respondents of Case 2 for example, explain that Brand B aids their sustainability champions in spreading the Brand B philosophy across the organisation while avoiding being too directional, and rather allowing managers the various functions to apply this ethos in the most appropriate way into their area of responsibility.

A sustainability program brand with its flexibility in interpretation reportedly encourages active collaboration and initiatives with stakeholders:

"And you know, the food suppliers are good, a good example of that that after, you know, kind of four, five years into our [Brand A] program now, you know they're very, very good on the food sourcing that we do. You know we don't often, you know we don't generally have to tell them what to do or you know, they almost tend to be pushing, you know, can be pushing us on that and saying 'oh 'we'd like to use this new supplier or this or that', they've very much taken, you know the ethos of that [Brand A] on board…"

(Case 1 — Head of Environment))

Brand A was initially introduced to engage with the internal stakeholders, with suppliers, and also to some extent as a tool for PR, but as it is seen as a successful tool in engaging these stakeholders there are now plans to extend this in communication to other external stakeholders as well.

The notion of sustainability program brands is also evident in the context of industry wide collaboration. There are several types of branded relationships, spanning from collaboration within one section of the value chain, (e.g. Brands D and E) to wider initiatives, including several players along the food and drink value chain (e.g. Brand F).

The participants of these branded relationships see the advantage of this collaboration: to gain credibility, learn from others and get the necessary support to progress, as expressed below.

"I mean, we will work collaboratively with groups. I suppose, on the packaging, you know, in [Brand F], we've got a group that isn't a

NGO, but is an authoritative voice on packaging, amongst other things, and gives us some cover and some credibility and we can work with them, they can point us in the right direction and, as other groups have focused on other things, you know, we've got a sort of safe haven there where we can work and we can demonstrate a bit of progress and work collaboratively to do things."

(Case 5 — Director of Communication)

The sustainability program brands, such as the discussed Brand F, are working well as they offer benefits to all stakeholders, and as such stimulate the formation of relationships between the stakeholders. Ideally this leads to the member companies integrating these industry wide objectives into their own sustainability strategies. There is evidence of this in Case 3, who have set their Brand C sustainability objectives based on the collaboration within Brand E. Case 3 also organise their own sustainability roundtables, inviting NGOs, trade associations, and industry colleagues. For example a roundtable was held at their launch of their Brand C to get feedback from their stakeholders.

"Let me repeat what I said at the very beginning, I said that certainly we don't have all the answers, yes, we think we built some strong plans and yes, we know we can go a long way to meeting our goals but we don't know how we are going to meet all of our targets and that really is the theme for today's discussion because innovation, collaboration and partnership will be critical as we work collectively on this journey towards a low carbon future."

(Case 3 — CEO and Chairman addressing roundtable audience)

Another benefit of introducing branding to the sustainability strategy, is that employees and other stakeholders can form an emotional attachment, which stimulates engagement, as expressed below.

"…when we went through all the different components of reducing our carbon footprint, one of the things we realised, is that we needed a way to really get everyone's emotional alignment into this…"

(Case 3 — Chair and CEO)

The importance of the emotive aspect through a brand at the centre of the sustainability strategy is also highlighted by the head of sustainable business in Case 2:

"This is about human change, engaging every consumer, every employee and everyone in the supply chain in the benefits of change, never ever turn this into a technical plan, this is a human change plan."

The discovery of sustainability program brands offers a new angle to the branding literature. The sustainability program brand is similar to the corporate brand, with the notion of an extended stakeholder perspective and a total commitment from all personnel, as per the definition by Balmer (2001: 281):

"A corporate brand involves the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition. This proposition underpins organisational efforts to communicate, differentiate, and enhance the brand vis-a-vis key stakeholder groups and networks. A corporate brand proposition requires total corporate commitment to the corporate body from all levels of personnel. It requires senior management fealty and financial support. Ongoing management of the corporate brand resides with the chief executive officer and does not fall within the remit of the traditional directorate of marketing."

There are, however, some visible differences between the two concepts, with the sustainability program brand being primarily linked to the sustainability objectives, activities and performance, with an

emphasised need for active collaboration with value chain members, and is as such a highly dynamic brand concept. It is also possible that, while attributes of a corporate brand are relatively stable over time (Balmer & Gray, 2003), a sustainability program brand needs to continuously evolve as new understandings about sustainable practices emerge. So while a corporate brand encompasses the totality of a firm's objectives, actions, communication and brands, and is the overarching brand, including product brands and sustainability program brands, the sustainability program brand in itself is focused on the sustainability agenda of the firm. Ideally, however, the sustainability agenda is totally integrated in the business model and cannot easily be separated from the overall corporate objectives, and the boundary between the corporate brand and the sustainability program brand becomes elusive.

This may be the case in what Lindgreen et al. (2012) call a 'CSR brand', which essentially is a corporate brand based on CSR ethos. A similar approach is also discussed in a conceptual paper by Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014), arguing that operations and marketing need to be integrated in order to successfully implement sustainability ethos in a firm, and that this can be achieved through branding. Similar to Lindgreen et al. (2012) they view sustainability as integrated in the corporate brand, and their suggested communication strategies are primarily one-way in the form of advertising and reporting on performance. The driver for integrating sustainability is primarily to gain legitimacy and reputation, which is also the angle taken by Czinkota et al. (2014). So, while scholars like Lindgreen et al. (2012); Czinkota et al. (2014) and Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014) promote CSR branding, their focus is on CSR as integrated into the corporate brand, and not on the phenomena of branding the actual sustainability process. The findings from this research thus add a new dimension to the corporate branding literature.

Finally, another benefit with a branded program is that it enables communication consistency, as expressed by Case 1 - Head of environment:

"…whereas they just know [Brand A], you know, it's our environmental program, it's about recycling, it's about you know, saving energy. If they can remember that much then that's perfect by me and um, then if a customer says 'what's that [Brand A] badge mean?' Or 'what does [Brand A] mean?' They can explain it quite easily and I think that makes, just having that kind of consistency makes it easier to communicate."

The standardisation of the communication strategy not only offers resource efficiency (Crane & Matten, 2010), but supports the important notions of consistency stressed in the corporate communication literature (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Simoes, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005, Kitchen & Schultz, 2009; Fukukawa, Balmer, & Gray, 2007; Balmer, Powell, & Greyser, 2011). There are, however, emerging challenges to the approach of 'one sight, one sound' when the communication becomes symmetric, as it is no longer the firm that is in sole control of the message delivery (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009).

Finally, the outer circle of the framework represents sustainability progress (Fig. 1), reported as the ultimate outcome from collaboration and co-creation of the stakeholders, stimulated by the sustainability program brand. The findings highlight the firms' ambitions to gain credibility and to keep the industry sector competitive, resonating well with the economic pillar of sustainability. The authors of this paper hope, however, that the firms developing these sustainability strategies also have a genuine interest in promoting society wide sustainability progress in terms of the social and environmental aspects.

5. Conclusions

This paper provides insights into how firms attempt symmetric sustainability communication with the aim of stimulating collaboration and co-creation with their stakeholders, and a framework is presented to illustrate how this can be achieved. The findings reveal that primarily three stakeholder groups (employees, suppliers, and industry colleagues) are targeted with reasonably symmetrical two-way communication, as these groups play a significant role in facilitating for the firm to execute its sustainability agenda. An important finding is the notion of sustainability program brands as platforms for communication across stakeholders. A sustainability program brand facilitates the communication of a complex topic to diverse stakeholders by offering simplification, flexibility and emotional attachment, and helps to frame communication in a consistent manner.

As such, the insights reported in this paper contribute to the academic literature in several ways: Firstly, by adding to the CSR/sustainability communication literature, where calls have been made for better understanding on how to effectively deploy two-way communication strategies to achieve co-creation with diverse audiences (Grunig and Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Gregory, 2007; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). While these previous research studies provide useful insights into symmetric communication, empirical testing is very limited. Secondly, this research contributes to the area of coopetition, where the vast majority of papers focuses on the buyer–seller relationship and exclude how these relationships portray themselves on a more corporate level, including also other key stakeholders. Further, following Chin et al.'s (2008) notion of communication management as an important aspect of the management of these relationships, there is limited understanding on the communication aspect of coopetitive relationships.

In addition, as a third impact, this research adds to the branding literature. Whilst this literature strand is rich in research on corporate and product/service brands and how they impact consumer loyalty, corporate image and identity, branding has traditionally been undervalued in B2B marketing and has primarily been focussed on the behaviour of organisational buyers (McDowell Mudambi et al., 1997; Doyle, & Wong, 1997; Mudambi, 2002). There is very little knowledge of the complexities of branding to a broader stakeholder context (Virgo & de Chernatony, 2006; Ind et al., 2013; Czinkota et al., 2014), such as a sustainability program with the aim of not just achieving customer loyalty and corporate image but also to stimulate interest, initiatives and innovation. Furthermore, the insights of a sustainability program brand as a communication vehicle introduce the hitherto overlooked perspective of branding the integration process of CSR into a corporate brand, where previous research has primarily focused on CSR as an element integrated in the corporate brand (Lindgreen et al., 2012; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014).

Several issues remain unexplored, however, and this calls for future research. For example in the case of sustainability program brands, these are different from product and corporate brands, and future research could look into how the sustainability program brand sits within the corporate brand. Building on insights from previous research (Kitchen & Schultz, 1998; Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer et al., 2007; Balmer et al., 2011; Fukukawa et al., 2007) it would be interesting to further explore how to align communication from such a program brand with the overall corporate communication to ensure consistency. On this note, further research is needed to improve the understanding on how to ensure communication consistency in a context where the firm is not fully in control of message delivery due to stakeholders' co-creation of communication (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009).

This research takes a simplified approach to communication, by taking primarily a focal firm perspective to communication and thereby neglecting the complexities of taking a network view. The research design has included some stakeholders in order to achieve a broader perspective, but future research could expand this and include further stakeholders to gain a clearer understanding on the applicability of the framework in a network context.

The findings reported here are further limited to the food and drink industry in Western Europe, and further research into other industry sectors and geographical areas would be beneficial in order to

assess whether the conclusions can be generalised for other contexts as well.

There are also several practical implications to this research. The developed framework depicts in a practical modus how businesses can design sustainability communication with the potential to harness stakeholder differences and increase motivation, learning, innovation, and collaborative power. By building sustainability communication based on a brand, simplification and flexibility can be achieved and, importantly, it provides a platform for engaging with diverse stakeholders.

Three stakeholder groups were reported as the key participants in sustainability initiatives; however managers should be aware that stakeholder saliency might vary over time and other stakeholder groups should be continuously monitored to assess whether they can add value in order to promote additional stakeholder groups to active co-creators. There are at the same time reports of imbalance in the food and drink value chain, with retailers being criticised by other value chain members as being too dictatorial in their communication. A symmetric communication strategy therefore should seek feedback from its target audience to ensure that the communication is also perceived as symmetric from the receivers' end. On a similar note regarding communication to employees, it is found that it is primarily senior managers that are invited to co-create. A firm might thus miss out on creativity potential and motivation from more junior staff. This should be investigated, bearing in mind that the firm might need to provide education and resources to also allow the possibility for the employees to take action.

Industry-wide, or value chain-wide forums and roundtables offer useful platforms for non-competitive collaboration on sustainability issues. While there appears to be an emphasis on the economical aspect of keeping the industry sector or value chain competitive, attention should also be given to social and environmental challenges to provide long term competitiveness for the contexts in which the firms operate.

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