Making Sense of Sustainability
– A study on how sustainability ambitions affect
sustainability performance in a retail company

Ellen Appeltofft

Making Sense of Sustainability

- A study on how sustainability ambitions affect sustainability performance in a retail company

Ellen Appeltofft

Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between the perception of sustainability and sustainability performance within an organization. To understand how to fully integrate sustainability in an organization, I have in this study found that knowing what is needed to link words to practice is key. Even when sustainability values are incorporated in an organization, there can still be a dissonance between what the values state and what the performance shows. With the aid of Practice theory I was able to deepen the understanding of where this dissonance occurs. By rejecting the dualism of perception and performance, I was able to investigate how perception and performance mutually affect sense-making within an organization. I also found that the indefinability of sustainability need not be a hinder, it need not mean the same for all. Instead, for full integration of sustainability, what is important is that sustainability directives are translated into doable actions that are relevant for each practice.

Keywords: Sustainability, strategy integration, communication, practices, sense-making

1.   Introduction

"What I personally care about is that you feel that you [through the company] can have an impact, ... , you still contribute more than you can as an individual. I think you should push that feeling, I think many can be motivated by that idea"

> - A respondents' reflection on why sustainability work in her company matters.

Today many companies claim to continuously work with ensuring more sustainable practices, by producing annual Sustainability Reports containing sustainability performances and strategies. Additionally, sustainability goals are commonly found as part of organizations' mission, vision and value statements. As of 2010, 75 % of business executives globally stated that sustainability "*is important to the financial success of their companies*" (Mirvis et al., 2010, p. 316). Whether the objective lies in gaining market advantages, following regulations or in a concern for social issues and the environment, these companies claim to see the implementation of sustainability strategies as valuable (Epstein & Buhovac, 2010). Sustainability has in this sense come to be a crucial part of many major companies' core business.

However, while sustainability features are high on the agenda it remains unclear to what extent companies put words into practice. There is evidence that instead of sustainability goals, short-term profits are prioritized, because many companies simply do not build strong enough internal sustainability engagements (Mirvis et al. 2010). The integration needed to achieve such engagement may prove difficult as the actual meaning of sustainability is diverse between different actors (Shiroyama et al., 2011), making an integrated and unified approach to sustainability complex. These differing ideas of sustainability may thus be a major obstacle for companies when they strive to put words into practice.

In previous studies of corporate sustainability, just a limited number of studies have approached the difficulties of implementing corporate sustainability in organizations (Linnenluecke et al., 2009). Leaders and management often encounter internal barriers when implementing corporate sustainability-oriented changes. The creation of sustainability documents as policy or strategies can be a managerial method to communicate the organizations' stand on sustainability, although internal subcultures can create a diffusion concerning the understanding of corporate sustainability, even in the presence of these documents (IBID). The question is to what degree vision, mission and value statements actually function as internal guidance towards a more sustainable business, i.e. for putting words into practice (Mirvis et al, 2010).

For a company to be fully sustainable, it needs to reach a level from which it can continue to work, indefinitely, without negative effects on the environment or mankind (Pohl & Tolhurst, 2010). To reach this level of

sustainability, sustainable practices must be completely integrated in the whole organization (Harris & Crane, 2002). As stated, previous studies (Harris & Crane, 2002; Linnenluecke et al., 2009) have raised concerns about the limited research concerning the barriers management encounter when aiming at integrating sustainability, or "greening", organizations. This study follows in the footsteps of these previous studies, though I will strive to understand not just how sustainability is understood in an organization but also how sustainability is performed. Thus, the aim of this study *is to develop a better understanding for how sustainability ambitions affect performance in a retail company*. By conducting this study, the hope is to identify some of the challenges of integrating sustainability within an organization. Based on the above short description of the current debate I found that an in-depth study of the different ways in which a company make sense of sustainability would be a relevant direction to study in order to contribute to the aim. Therefore, in order to explore more in-depth the processes of sense-making in an organisation this study will turn the gaze inward in one specific retail company to explore the following research question:

How do actors within a retail company perceive and perform sustainability?

To guide the collection of empirical material and the construction of the analysis I have employed two sub-questions: (i) *How do actors within the organization make sense of sustainability?* And (ii) *How does actors' sense making of sustainability affect sustainability performance?*
Practice theory is used as my conceptual framework and will be applied in this thesis to analyse the understanding of sustainability and sustainability practices within a workplace. Practice theory explains that 'structures' as rules (or strategies) and institutions exist not as firm 'things' that influence individuals and individual behaviour. Instead, these structures, or systems, are seen as through interaction being produced and reproduced in practice. Meaning, rules and institutions does not simply influence, they are themselves created and interpreted through practice (Arts et al, 2013). Practice theory stresses that behaviour is not a result of individual attitudes, values and beliefs but instead that action is embedded within social practices (Warde, 2005).
The study is formed as a qualitative single-case study and empirical material was collected through semi-structured interviews at a Swedish retail company.

1.1 Disposition

BACKGROUND: A short presentation of the sustainability field and previous studies concerning organizations relation to sustainability and the integration thereof.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Here the concept of Practice theory is further discussed and operationalized for the forthcoming analysis.

METHODOLOGY: This section discloses the methodological framework, choice of case and method and how the empirical material was approached.

ANALYSIS: In this section the empirical material is analysed in relation to the theoretical framework. The analysis is divided into 2 parts, where Part I is based on the first sub-question and Part II is based on the second sub-question.

DISCUSSION: In the discussion I strive to apply my findings to a broader research scope, hence I here examine the findings from the analysis in relation to the studies presented in the background.

CONCLUSION: Concluding remarks stemming from the analysis and discussion.

2.   Background

I will in this section of the thesis shortly describe the evolution of the concept of sustainability followed by a review of a selection of previous studies concerning the organizational challenges of integrating sustainability.

2.1 Sustainability

Sustainability is a concept that during the 1970s came to attract attention in academia and during the 1980's the concept became a 'popular' theme in other spheres, such as e.g. non-governmental organizations. The well-known Brundtland report (or *Our Common Future* as the report is titled), released in 1987 by the World Commission on Environmental Development (WCED), is commonly referred to as the starting point for the concept of sustainable development (Kidd, 1992). The definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland report is as follows: "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (WCED, 1987, p. 43).
   A clear and consistent definition of sustainability has never been agreed upon and it is not likely that so will happen, as the meaning of the term sustainability is highly dependent on the context in which it is applied (Kidd, 1992; Brown et al., 1987). In broad terms though, sustainable development concerns the human relationship with the global environment and the main idea of sustainable development is that decisions made today should not harm the ability to maintain or improve future living standards. (Brown et al., 1987).

2.1.1 Corporate Sustainability

Today, an understanding for the concept of sustainability, however defined, is to some degree incorporated in all spheres of society; governance, the private sector and civil society. Relevant for this thesis is how the private sector, especially, has addressed the subject. Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010) explain that the concept of Corporate Sustainability came as a response to the WCED. Further they state that the definition of the term varied depending on how organizations classified sustainability, whether the term concerned ecological issues, social or both. It should be noted that the term Corporate Sustainability was preceded by the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a concept stemming back to the 1950s' (Carrol, 1999). CSR came to be a description of *"the integration of social, environmental and economic concerns into an organizations culture, decision-making, strategy and operations"* (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010, p. 358). CSR is a concept, just as sustainability, that lacks a unified definition (Carrol, 1999; Skudiene & Auruskeviciene, 2012).

The corporate use of CSR-strategies are argued to be able to result in improved relations with society and other stakeholders, a notion resulting in that many corporations have adopted the CSR-agenda (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007). Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010) do though stress that there has been a development in the organizational approach to sustainability, from CSR as mainly a strategic tool incorporated at management level with regard to external stakeholders – towards a more integrated sustainability approach; Corporate Sustainability. Meaning, from only treating sustainability as an external demand, the internal organization has in more recent studies been given more attention in its role in the achievement of the organizations sustainability efforts. This leads us to the next section of this chapter where I will present a selection of studies addressing the integration of sustainability within organizations.

2.2 Integrating sustainability

2.2.1 The Organizational Culture Theory approach

Linnenluecke et al. (2009) state that in previous studies of corporate sustainability the importance of the internal organization of the company has historically been overlooked. Linnenluecke et al. state that leaders and management often encounter internal barriers when implementing corporate sustainability-oriented changes. The existence of sustainability documents as policies or strategies, they argue, can function as a managerial method to communicate the organizations stand on sustainability - although, Linnenluecke et al. claim that internal subcultures can create a diffusion concerning the understanding of corporate sustainability, even in the presence of these policy documents.

Applying the concept of organizational culture theory has been a popular approach to corporate sustainability research. Linnenluecke et al. (2009) state that organizational culture theory most commonly refers to 'shared' or 'common' values among organizational members, concepts they argue are

relevant when addressing the incorporation of sustainability. Further, Hatch & Schultz (1997) state that organizational culture includes all members of an organization and stems not only from top management level but develops within all hierarchical levels. Harris & Crane (2002) argue along the same lines as Linnenluecke et al. (2009), that for organizations to become 'greener', the organizational culture need to go through a drastic change. Further, Harris & Crane argue that previous studies on organizational culture change have focused on a top-down approach. Meaning, these studies have focused on management, assuming that good management will result in that values will transcend within the organization. Just as Linnenluecke et al., Harris & Crane state that there is a need to give attention to the existing cultural differences within an organization. Further, Harris & Crane state that one of the problems of creating a unified view on how to 'greening' an organization cannot be found in the concept itself, but rather in how the concept is operationalized. In other words, while there might be a common understanding for why an organization should become 'greener', diverse perspectives exist on how this should be done.

2.2.2 Formal and informal structures

To mention an approach to integrating sustainability from a different perspective, The Epstein Corporate Sustainability Model (see Epstein & Buhovac, 2010) addresses the issue in terms of informal and formal systems. The authors state that: "*Companies need the processes, performance measurement, and reward systems (formal systems) to measure success and to provide internal and external accountability*" (Epstein & Buhovac, 2010, p. 306). Accordingly, they argue that informal systems, where they include leadership, culture and people, are important for successful sustainability integration. The authors, who conducted a thorough study among several global enterprises, argue that the reason for why many organizations that have the formal structures in place still do not fully succeed with their sustainability efforts, is because they lack the informal structures vital for such success. Epstein & Buhovacs' study shows that companies as Nike and P&G have successfully implemented sustainability due to strong leadership and organizational culture, in combination with formal structures. The authors state that these informal structures, as strong and motivational leadership, are crucial if the formal systems shall have the sought for effect.

Mirvis et al. (2010) argue that it is unclear what actual effect mission, value and vision statements have on integrating sustainability within an organization. Mervis et al. argue along the same lines as Epstein & Buhovacs (2010) that these statements or strategies are crucial in sustainability process – but must be integrated within the whole organization in order to have effect, which again leads us back to the issue of how to achieve that sort of integration. Because while Epstein & Buhovacs' model visualizes formal systems for such integration and do emphasize the importance of informal systems – their approach is still much based in a top-down perspective starting at management level.

3. Conceptual framework

I have in this thesis applied Practice theory as the theoretical lens used to interpret and understand the studied context, individual behaviour and sense-making. Practice theory is used as a theoretical lens as it supplies a way of interpreting and understanding a social phenomenon.

3.1 Practice theory

In this section I will present my conceptual framework, namely practice theory. I will under 3.1.1 establish a brief overview of the history of practice theory, followed by a general introduction mainly based on the works of Reckwitz (2002) and to some extent supported by Feldman & Orlikowski (2011). In section 3.1.2 I will introduce 5 elements of practice (as presented by Reckwitz, 2002), followed by section 3.1.3 where I in *Table 1* present how these elements will be operationalized in the analysis.

3.1.1 Practice theory in broad strokes

Social theorists as Pierre Bourdieu in 1977 and Anthony Giddens in 1979 introduced the first 'wave' of practice theory. These theorists sought to find an explanation for social phenomena neither as a result of individual action, nor as bounded by structures. In other terms, practice theory was established as a concept of understanding agency and structure, where neither exceeds the other in influential power over social phenomena. The concept of practice was thereby established (Posthill, 2010). Practice theory has since evolved and is today a theory stemming from many perspectives, resulting in a group of related practice theories. This means that there are many practice theoretical approaches to consider. For this thesis I have chosen to apply practice theory as it is portrayed by Reckwitz (2002), supported to some extent by Feldman & Orlikowski (2012), because I find these authors portrayal of the theory to be clear and articulate. For other approaches to Practice theory see e.g. Arts et. al (2013), Warde (2005) or Shove & Pantzar (2005).

   In broad terms, practice theory investigates practices as 'the social', consisting of multiple elements. These elements, as behaviour, mental activities, things and the use of things, understanding and knowledge – are all interconnected and are in practice theory all studied as an entity (Reckwitz, 2002). Practice theory can be found as a sub-theory to cultural theories, alongside with theories of cultural mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism. For an elaborated discussion on practice theory positioned against these other theories see Reckwitz (2002). Practice theory differs from other cultural theories in how practice theory perceives the relation between body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process and agent (Reckwitz, 2002). In contrast to what is named the *homo econimicus* and *homo sociologicus*, cultural theories understand action by *"reconstructing the symbolic structure of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world …"* (Reckwitz p. 245). This means that behaviour is not seen as an outcome of certain needs or intentions (as *homo econimicus)* neither is behaviour seen as an effect of

8

normative "laws" or expectations (as *homo sociologicus)*. Instead, social order and all that it entails, appears as collective structures or 'shared knowledge' that helps individuals ascribe meaning and to understand the world (Reckwitz, 2002).

Feldman & Orlikowski (2011) stress that what is critical to practice theory is the relationship between situated action and the social world where the action takes place. Situated action means to see action from where it takes place, including *what* is happening and *why* (Vera et al., 1993). The authors explain that there are three key concepts worthy of closer attention: Firstly, "*situated actions are consequential in the production of social life*" (p. 1241). This means that a practice incorporates action that consequently results in the development of the practice itself. Secondly, "*dualisms are rejected as a way of theorizing*" (p. 1241). The implication of this is that practice theory rejects the separation of entities as agency and structure or the body and the mind. Instead of seeing these entities as separate, they shall be studied as entwined dualities, dependent and affected by each other. The third concept that Feldman & Orlikowski present is that "*relations are mutually constitutive*" (p. 1241). This means that no phenomena exists in solitude of another. This third concept entails that social orders cannot be understood from solely structure or solely agency, instead it should be understood that while agency is influenced by social structures, equally are social structures influenced by agency (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011).

3.1.2 Elements of practice

As I stated in the previous section, Reckwitz (2002) points out that social practices consist of several elements. I will in this section describe these elements in closer detail, with the intention to in a more pragmatic way portray the parts of practice theory vital for the forthcoming analysis-section of this thesis.

1. The body and the mind

The body is the element that portrays, or brings to life, social order by its actions. The actions the body takes, as reading, writing or talking are hence seen as a 'routinized bodily performance'. Thus, when we adapt to a practice, we also adapt our bodily movements to said practice (Reckwitz, 2002). As claimed when rejecting dualism (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), the mind is not separate from the body but works in coalition with it and the practice in which the activity (mental, bodily or both) takes place. Mental activity is affected by the 'social' within the practice, but neither precedes the other. For when the body adapts to or 'performs' in a practice, it does not do so without any mental activity. Reckwitz (2002) explains that for the body to perform within a social practice, the individual "*must take over both the bodily and mental patterns that constitute the practice*" (p. 252).

2. Things

As Reckwitz (2002) states, things and objects are essential parts of a practice. Things and objects are enablers or limiters of a practice, depending on their function and the individual carrying out the practice e.g. a computer or a phone. All practices differ, but in many practices 'things' are an

essential component. Thus, it is arguable that *"most social practices consist of routinized relations between several agents (body/mind) and objects"* (p. 253). Many 'things' and their appearance are seen as obvious, meaning that their existence is taken for granted and not questioned within a practice (Reckwitz, 2002). Further, for this practice to be well-functioning, there is a need for knowledge about the 'thing' in use. Leading us to the next element of practices.

3.   Knowledge & discourse/language

Within Practice theory, knowledge is considered complex in terms of how something is understood and how wants and feelings affect this understanding. Reckwitz (2002) explains that in a very simplified way, *"in a practice, knowledge is a particular way of 'understanding the world'"* (p. 253). The knowledge that is embedded within a certain practice affects how the 'world' is understood within that practice. Reckwitz further explains that this understanding also concerns 'things', humans or oneself. Knowledge within practices carries a vital role in that sense, since it aids the one who carries out the practice to constitute an underlying understanding of the practice.

Collective knowledge is visualized within a practice as it is collectively reproduced over time and space. Hence, collective knowledge within a social practice is a shared form of understanding (Reckwitz, 2002). Collective knowledge is commonly produced by discursive practices (i.e. a routinized way of talking about something), practices that through language ascribe meaning to things, situations, phenomena etc. Language is in this sense routinized as it is, depending on the practice, used to ascribe meanings to objects and to interpret what takes place within the practice.

4.   Structure/Process

Feldman & Orlikowskis' (2011) third concept states that: *"relations are mutually constitutive"* (p. 1241). This relates to Reckwitz' (2002) discussion concerning the role of structures or processes within practice theory. Reckwitz explains that social practices are expressed in a routinized manner i.e. in how something is understood, how things are used or how the body performs a certain practice. Linking this to Feldman & Orlikowskis' third concept, Reckwitz argues that *"structures is thus nothing that exists solely in the 'head' or in patterns of behaviour: one can find it in the routine nature of action"* (p. 255). In other words, structure comes from how something 'usually is done', from routinized behaviour.

Reckwitz (2002) here discusses the concept of 'breaking' a routinized social practice, which means to change it. As explained, practice theory sees social practices as routinized behaviour and for these practices to change, there must be a 'crisis'. Social practices are constantly reproduced but it is when this reproduction somehow is interrupted that the practice might change. As an example, if a routinized behaviour is hindered by e.g. new laws, policies or management initiatives – the practice in which said routine takes place might change. A new routine will then take its place, which thus in turn will be reproduced over time and constitute a 'new' social practice. It is when a practice is faced with such a 'crisis' that the existence of the practice is recognized and reflected upon (Reckwitz, 2002).

10

5. The agent/Individual

Reckwitz' (2002) fifth and final element of practice is the agent/individual. In practice theory terms, the agents are the "the body/minds who 'carry' and 'carry out' social practices. Thus, the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried out by agents" (p. 256). Reckwitz here again stresses that 'carrying out' a practice is not solely a bodily activity, but a mental one as well. He further explains that agents who exist within a practice are neither independent nor dependent actors. Hence, agents interpret the world and their role within it and use their knowledge and motivations conferring with the specific practice.

The relation between the agent and the individual is simply that the agent exists in one practice, but the individual exists in many. This means that the element of the agent can be understood from the practice in which he/she exists/performs, meanwhile the individual is to be understood as existing in many and in transference between practices (Reckwitz, 2002).

3.1.3 Operationalization of practice theory

I have chosen Reckwitz' (2002) 5 elements of practice since they present a suitable distinction of elements that influence the understanding and performance of a practice. To be able to operationalize practice theory in my analysis, I have applied these elements when analysing the empirical material. This will be discussed further in 4.3.3.

Table 1: Elements of practice and how to operationalize them

Element	Implication	Practical example for analysis
The body & the mind	These are not separate but two coexisting and cooperating entities.	Performing routinized practices, while being aware of said performance.
Things	Things influence social behaviour by their sole existence and the function they have in the practice	Performing routinized practices, while being aware of said performance.
Knowledge & discourse/language	Knowledge within a practice enables the agent to understand the world according to that practice. Discourse and language influence how the agents establish the knowledge about a practice and hence enables them to make sense of the practice.	Sustainability is communicated as valued within the org., affecting individual sense-making within a practice.
Structure/process	Agents in practices are influenced by structure and processes, equally as structures/processes	Routines, financial goals, purchasing goals, sustainability objectives.

11

	are influenced by the agents within the practice. They are mutually constitutive.	
The agent/individual	The agent performs within and according to a practice. The agent is though also an individual, existing in many practices.	How personal understandings of sustainability transfers to and affects practices at the workplace.

4. Methodology

Under this section I will present my methodological framework where I inter alia will discuss my interpretivist approach. Further, I will argue for the choice of performing a case study, how the case was chosen, how the empirical material was gathered and finally how this material was analysed.

4.1 Methodological framework

The research design of this study follows a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a method of "*exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem*" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 4). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on the values of words rather than statistics and data. Further, the study follows an interpretivist approach, meaning that the research, aided by practice theory, aims at *understanding* the researched phenomenon (Bryman, 2008). The interpretative design leads the study to be formed as abductive research. Abductive research means to construct theories that "*are grounded in every-day activities, in the language and meanings of social actors*" (Ong, pp. 422-423). This approach highly relates to practice theory in that abductive research focuses on the meanings and interpretations of actors involved in the study (Ong, 2012), just as practice theory enables an understanding for individuals interpretations of and performance within a practice (Hargreave, 2011).

Abductive research has a social constructivist perspective as focus lies on how the social world is perceived by actors from the 'inside' – and how that perception creates a mutual understanding for unspoken rules and knowledge, affecting how they do what they do on a daily basis (Ong, 2012). Social constructivism argues, along similar terms, that the 'world' is constructed and re-constructed by human actors, just as they themselves are influenced by the world in which they exist (Bryman 2008). Abductive research perceives social actors as constructors of a social reality, stressing that there is not *one* single unchanging reality (Ong, 2012). This approach to research is highly relevant for this study as it clearly states a strategy for where the answers to questions of 'how' and 'why' can be found. This is an

argument that will stand as a foundation for my choice of method: case study. I will discuss this further in the forthcoming section.

4.2 Case study

I have in this thesis performed a case study, which "*…. simply* (is) *an in-depth study of a particular instance, or a small number of instances, of a phenomenon"* (Hyde, 2000, p. 83). If one seek to answer questions of 'how' and 'why' in social occurrences and the study demands an in-depth description of a social situation performing a case study is relevant (Yin, 2014). This is in line with this being a qualitative study, meaning that the study follows an epistemology where interpretation and understanding of a social reality lies in focus (Bryman, 2008). A case study is formed in such a way that the researcher is allowed to try to understand both smaller complex situations as group behaviour or organizational and managerial processes and more holistic contexts (Yin, 2014).

A common critique towards case study methods concerns the ability to generalize from a case study (Yin, 2014). Though, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that social science is not suitable for creating general, 'predictive', context-independent theory. A case study is not about finding a 'sample' that can be validly applied in a broad scope of cases, but rather about how a case in relation to theory can expand a deeper understanding – for both the theory and case at hand. In other words, a case study can "*… shed empirical light about some theoretical concepts or principles"* (Yin, 2014, p. 40).

This study is of the single-case kind and is based on the rational that this is a *common* case. This means that the case represents an everyday situation, whereas the social processes of the 'situation' will be analysed in relation to a theoretical framework (Yin, 2014). As Flyvbjerg (2006) explains: "*The advantage of the case study is that it can 'close in' on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice*" (p. 235), an advantage beneficial when striving to understand how sense-making takes place.

Finally, the case study method has been criticised for containing a bias towards *verification* – meaning that the researcher is prone to finding data which will verify his or hers predisposed assumptions about the case, while evading data that will not (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Au contraire, studies show that case studies are more prone towards *falsification* of preconceived ideas and notions about the case at hand (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Furthermore, the abductive design of this study strives to deepen the understanding of how sustainability is integrated and performed – implicating that there is no gain in verifying any predisposed assumptions. Rather, the task I have assumed in this thesis is to as interpret, with help from theory, the 'whys' & 'hows'' of the case at hand. Hence, when conducting this study I strived to constantly search for how sense-making took place at different parts of the studied organization.

4.3 Empirical material

4.3.1 Case-selection

In writing this thesis, I wished to extend my knowledge about how Swedish companies work with sustainability – mainly since many of them today claim to do so. I find the retail industry especially interesting, due to the challenge of working with sustainability in large supply-chains located on several continents in addition to complex internal organizations. This particular organization was selected as a suitable case since it is a retail company actively working with sustainability. Further, since I had the opportunity to do an internship at the organization in the fall of 2015, I had appropriate connections enabling me to get access to information and respondents crucial for meeting the aim of the study. I was encouraged by members of the management to write my master thesis in connection to their organization. They argued that any knowledge they could gain concerning improving their sustainability work would be beneficial for the organization. I was though free to chose the subject the thesis would cover.

The study is limited to the employees at the head office in Stockholm (consisting of around 230 people). Admittedly, it would have been a great gain to have had insights from employees at the stores as well, so to expand the hierarchal scope of the study. Such a large study would though have demanded more time and recourses than available to me at this time.

I have chosen to keep the chosen case organization anonymous, mainly for the reason that if naming the organization, some of the respondents' anonymity would be threatened, something that was asked for from the majority of them.

4.3.2 Empirical material collection

Under the course of 5 weeks I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were between 40-70 minutes long, where the majority were of the longer kind. The length of the interviews was affected to the most extent on the respondents' knowledge about sustainability within the organization. I will discuss this in more detail under *Interviews*.
The respondents were chosen so that they all represented different positions at different levels of the organization, with the aim of collecting diverse perspectives. The respondents were chosen by an expert according to his/hers "*personal knowledge*" (Merriam, 1994, p. 69), meaning that the manager aiding me in selecting the respondents had a good overview of the organization, its different positions and individuals. The risk here was that only employees with 'known' dedication for sustainability would be selected. I was though clear in my request to select diverse employees, a request I believe was met. It was the manager who initially contacted the selected employees, to add legitimacy in the request. We contacted 15 employees, of whom some were not able to participate due to lack of time - resulting in a total of 11 interviews. Even though some people were not able to participate I still feel content with the selection since I was able to interview individuals from almost all departments of the company.

As stated, I have in this thesis chosen to keep the organization and respondents' names anonymous. It is though vital for the analysis that the

14

reader understands what different positions the respondents have, which is why *Table 2* below will present a short overview of the respondents and their positions within the company. I will also include which practices I consider them to be involved in within the organization, an understanding I believe to be of value when reading the forthcoming analysis. The practices have been established in line with the respondents' own reflections of their daily activities within the organization. Note that I beyond what is stated in *Table 2* also include all respondents' in the practice that is being part of the organization, to be able to explore how sense-making differs between meta- and macro practices.

Table 2: Respondents & their positions

#	Gender	Time at company	Position	Practice
1	W	5 yrs	Sustainability manager	Management, developing and enforcing sustainability
2	W	1-2 yrs	Information manager	Management, developing strategies, communication/information
3	W	8 yrs	Purchaser/product developer, beauty products	Material selection, purchasing, supplier dialogue
4	W	6,5 yrs	Purchaser, textiles	Material selection, product selection, supplier dialogue
5	M	6 yrs	Supplier developer	Supplier dialogue, enforcing supplier code of conduct
6	M	10 yrs	Designer	Developing collections, material selection to some extent
7	W	3 yrs	Human resourses	Internal education programs
8	M	5,5 yrs	Transportation manager	Subcontractor dialogue, enforcing directives
9	W	-	Designer	Developing collections
10	W	6 yrs	Purchaser/Product developer, textiles	Material selection, purchasing, supplier dialogue
11	M	5 yrs	Economy/energy agreements	Controlling energy use, subcontractor dialogue.

Interviews

The interviews were performed following an interview guide. This guide consisted of open-ended questions, themed following key concepts of practice theory as sense-making, structure/agency and knowledge, with sustainability as an overarching theme. I chose this interview method since semi-structured interviews leave room for inter-subjective understandings (Crang & Cook, 2007). Hence, the semi-structured interview guide allowed open questions that enabled the respondents to individually reflect on the

subject at hand, while I could identify certain reflections I wanted them to elaborate on. I would here argue that it was the structure of the interview guide that affected the differing interview lengths. Even though the guide enabled room for follow-up questions, it proved to be problematic to enable some of the respondents to give elaborate reflections. When respondents did not reflect as much as I wished, I did to the best of my ability try to enable their reflections (e.g. by asking follow-up questions or presenting the question from a different perspective). Admittedly, this would at times become difficult since I strived to not influence their answers by asking leading questions, which would have affected the reliability of my study. When I reflected on this dilemma after the interviews, I drew the conclusion that this problem to the most extent was connected to the respondents personal interest in sustainability and/or to which extent their position and every day work was connected to sustainability, where higher interest resulted in more elaborate reflections. Further, I experienced that some respondents whose positions were closely connected to sustainability directives, also limited their reflections to these directives.

For an interview to be rewarding it is important for the researcher to perform thorough initial background research. Not only to be able to ask essential questions, but also to be able to follow and understand the interviewees' responses (Crang & Cook, 2007). The studied organizations' existing sustainability strategies functioned as such background information and aided much in this process and helped accommodate this advice, as well as my previous experience from doing an internship at the organization. I experienced that this pre-knowledge aided much in the interviews e.g. when striving to aid the respondents in their reflections. Admittedly, the personal experience I had from the organization also affected my role as a researcher. For example, sometimes I noticed myself wanting to mention something a respondent had overlooked, which would influence the reliability of the research i.e. I would then force them to reflect upon something they did not relate to by themselves. This proved to be one of the biggest challenges in collecting the empirical material.

The next section will cover how I approached the empirical material gathered for this study.

4.3.3 The analytic approach

When the empirical material had been gathered and transcribed, the mass of material and was analysed. In analysing the material, themes related to the study's aim and research questions were identified – as well as complementing themes that emerged when going through the transcriptions. This analytical process was performed by open coding, as suggested by Crang & Cook (2007) in combination with a priori coding, where the pre-set codes stemmed from Reckwitz' (2002) 5 elements of practice (see 3.1.3: *Table 1*). I believe that the combination of open coding and a priori coding highly relates to the abductive approach in that the theoretical framework enabled an understanding for the empirical material but the combined coding-approach still left room for reflections stemming from the material itself.

The analysis laid focus on where and how sense-making took place e.g. how sense-making processes were influenced and affected by every-day

practices and vice versa. By applying the method of open coding together with a priori coding stemming from Practice theory, I was able to construct several sub-themes that in turn were sorted into more holistic, main themes. These main themes, in connection with the research questions and Reckwitz' 5 elements, are what consequently created the framework for the analysis-section of this study.

5. Analysis

This section will analyse the empirical material gathered from the interviews. The analysis is structured according to Reckwitz' (2002) 5 elements of practice, as presented in *Table 1* under section 3.1.3.

This analysis is divided into two sections, Part I and II. Part I is based on the first sub-question: *How do actors within the organization make sense of sustainability?* In Part I, the elements of practice in focus are: *The agent/the individual* and *knowledge/discourse*. As a result of the a priori coding in the empirical analysis, I consider these elements as highly influential on the 'sayings' and understandings related to sustainability, which Part I will focus on. The analysis in Part I addresses sense-making in practice and how a crisis in practice can affect sense-making and individual reflection.

Part II is based on the second sub-question; *How does actors' sense-making of sustainability affect sustainability performance?* This section will also focus on Reckwitz' elements of practice, mainly concerning: *Structure/processes*, *knowledge* and *things*. These were the elements that I found to stem from the a priori coding of the empirical material related to 'doings' rather than 'sayings' concerning sustainability. The analysis in Part II explores how the organizations sustainability strategies are reflected upon within different practices and how they are performed in practice.

By structuring the analysis in this manner I strive to meet the aim of this thesis and answer the main research question: *How do actors within a retail company perceive and perform sustainability?*

5.1 Part I: How do actors within the organization make sense of sustainability?

5.1.1 The nature of sustainability

The fact that sustainability is difficult to define and commonly is defined so differently between different actors lies as the basis for this research. During the interview sessions, I tried to enable the respondents to reflect on this matter. Firstly, I asked them to describe their personal definition of sustainability, in whatever terms that came to their minds. A majority of the respondents' personal definitions were based in the same concepts, all related to individual consumption; recycle, buy ecological food etc. Some respondents reflected about the subject of sustainability by incorporating the society and global environmental issues, as one respondent stated: "*It's a process that the whole society is involved in*" (Respondent 6) and yet

another argued along the same lines: *"Sustainability is a natural part of the society and I think many will need to take this step"* (Respondent 9).

Seeing sustainability as a societal process that would be unnatural to discard is a recurrent statement from the respondents. It seems as a majority of the respondents both interpret sustainability as something you yourself have a responsibility for in your everyday life (e.g. recycling), but they also see it as a complex issue incorporating the whole society. Reckwitz' (2002) 3rd element of practice*, knowledge & discourse/language*, touch upon this phenomenon. This 3rd element explains that knowledge within a practice enables the agent to understand 'the world' according to that practice. In relation to this, I found it interesting how the respondents reflect upon the subject of sustainability, something they do by defining it as a two-folded phenomenon in their everyday personal practice. By this I mean that just as Reckwitz claims, the knowledge the respondents gathered from the surrounding society or from the news, enables them to understand sustainability in different terms, depending on which practice they reflect from. Respondent 2, for example, starts by defining sustainability as the small things she does in her everyday life to do her part in the societal strive for a more sustainable society – clearly incorporating her knowledge about recycling, the negative effects of the meat industry etc. into her personal practice. However, she continues her reflection by incorporating a more holistic definition, talking about sustainability as a global phenomenon that includes all spheres of society. Respondent 2 is not alone in reflecting in this manner, breaking down a global phenomenon into pragmatic doings. I will get back to this in the Part II of this analysis, where I can see a similar pattern occurring when the respondents define the organizations sustainability practices and how these affect their work practice.

5.1.2 The relevance of sustainability

After discussing the subject of *what* sustainability is and *why* this is something that the organization commits to, it was soon clear to me that the *what* and *why* are closely connected. When asking Respondent 6, for example, why he believes that the organization is so committed to sustainability, he responds that "*Everything needs to be sustainable, it is where the societal development is heading. Not that it is going to solve itself, but it seems as though everything is moving towards that direction*". The respondent here uses his knowledge about sustainability to make-sense of its relevance, something that I do not in any way suggest is surprising. However, when discussing this in terms of practice theory, it is interesting to analyse why this knowledge affects the respondents. Arguably, the concept of sustainability is well known in todays' society - but simply because the knowledge is out there to be influenced by, does not mean that it will affect all equally. When discussing this with the respondents, some of their statements highly related to the concept of 'crisis in practice' (Reckwitz, 2002) - a concept that constitutes a structural disruption i.e. the introduction of new events makes the agent performing the practice question previous structures. This 'crisis' was visualized when I asked why they worked with sustainability in their work practice and some respondents referred to specific incidents where they were truly affected by the 'dark sides' of the industry and how that led them to see sustainability as a must

within their work practice. Respondent 10 (in the practice of purchaser) expresses the feeling she got after visiting a cotton farmer in India, "*So we interviewed this farmer and it turned out that he had cancer and that the whole village was affected by these chemicals. The chemicals had reached the groundwater. And then I thought, god, what are we doing?*".

The term 'crisis in practice' stems from Reckwitz' 4th element of practice, but I would like to link the concept to his 3rd element as well, whereas a 'crisis in practice' could constitute a situation where the agent within a practice encounters situations or knowledge that affects how s/he reflects upon said practice (as the above quotes exemplifies). In Reckwitz terms, knowledge within a practice helps the agent understand how to carry out said practice, but when new knowledge, which contradicts or develops previous knowledge, is incorporated in the practice, there is similarly a crisis in practice. The respondents' reflections show that this new knowledge forces the agent to revaluate how s/he understands the world from within the practice. It should here be noted that this 'crisis in practice' was not reflected upon or encountered by all respondents, but mainly by those involved with the practice of purchasing, which puts them close to the 'field'.

Moving on from Reckwitz' 3rd element of practice I would like to acknowledge Reckwitz' 5th element: *the agent/the individual*. When trying to understand the respondents' perception of sustainability and how it differs between practices it was quite apparent that individuals who value sustainability in their personal practice also bring these values into the organization and their work practices. Respondent 3 is a good example, as she explains that she personally feels that she wants to be part of sustainability efforts and wants to make a difference: "*I got this idea that I want to contribute to something, …, I think it's fun and it gives my job a bit more meaning if you get to do things here, if it feels like you are doing something right*". Respondent 9 argues along the same lines, stating that as she thinks about these issues outside of work, it is hard not to do so within as well; "*It's a bit like I'm starting to see that I'm part of a bigger picture*".

Relating this to Reckwitz' (2002) 5th element of practice, Reckwitz explains that agents are, even though practices consist of routinized behaviour, constantly aware and interpret the practice they 'carry out'. This means that their interpretation may affect the manner in which they carry out the practice – while their interpretation of the practice is affected by the practice itself. The individual then (in contrast to the agent) moves in-between practices and acts according to the practice in which s/he presently exists (i.e. becomes the agent of the practice). With this in mind, I find that some respondents' arguments for *why* sustainability is incorporated in the organization and in their own personal practices, to a great extent visualizes Reckwitz' 5th element of practice. As Reckwitz states, when the agent performs within a practice, s/he does not do so robotically, without reflection. My argument is that this reflection is influenced by the individual whom exists in many practices – in this case an individual whom in his/her personal life values the environment and wants to contribute in any way they can. Even though Reckwitz does not directly include this transference in the his 5th element, it is suitable with his argumentation for the 3rd element, which as earlier discussed mentions the impact knowledge and discourse have in the performance of a practice, knowledge which might

enter a practice from external sources. It is clear from the interviews that knowledge (which as Reckwitz states can influence how you feel about something) gathered within one practice has a tendency to accompany the individual when entering another practice. This also relates to Reckwitz' 1st element, *the body/mind* and Feldman & Orlikowskis' (2011) concept of rejecting dualism i.e. the body and the mind are coexisting entities, just as perception (the mind) and performance (the body) in this thesis are seen as dependent on each other and should be interpreted as such.

5.2 Part II: How does actors' sense-making of sustainability affect sustainability performance?

5.2.1 To talk about sustainability

When addressing the complexity of integrating sustainability strategies, I initiated this part of the interview by asking the respondents about their knowledge about the organizations sustainability work. Specifically, I asked them to convey how information concerning sustainability within the organization reaches them. From what I gathered from the respondents' and my personal experience at the company, the main channels for internal sustainability communication are: the intranet (internal communication tool), the annual presentation of the sustainability report (document) and various official and unofficial meetings where the subject is discussed. Many referred to the annual presentation of the sustainability report as a source of information, stating that it is when the report is presented that they gain knowledge about the organizations sustainability efforts. This correlates well with the information manager (Respondent 2) stating that the employees are the main target group for the sustainability report, supported by Respondent 1 (also part of the practice of management) who states in the same lines, that the sustainability report is mainly an internal information tool. When asking Respondent 3, whose practice of developing products rarely integrates with the management practice, about what happens with the information she gained after such an information briefing, she states that in her practice, even when information is gained, it is hard to make it relevant, mostly because of the difficulty to define what sustainability means when breaking it down from the organizational context.

In general, I would argue that communication about sustainability within the organization is rather a means of informing instead of communication (which would entail some level of interaction). Respondent 2, for example, explains that one of her main tasks in relation to sustainability is to inform the employees, mostly through the intranet. She states that it is through the intranet that they inform about news and activities, aiming to spread information and build up internal engagement. This is interesting because the value of this communication tool, the intranet, shows to differ depending on which practice you exist within. At the practice of management, the intranet is used as a communication tool, a vital part of Respondent 2s' practice of informing, but many respondents in practices further down in the organization do not assign equal level of necessity to the intranet. As Reckwitz (2002) states when discussing the 2nd element of practice, *things* are part of the routinized behaviour that the practice consists of. In the

practice of informing at management level, the intranet function as a fundamental tool within the practice of communicating. In other practices though, the intranet does not seem to have much value when it comes to communication or sustainability issues: *"You get so much information there! .... as a flow of information I think it works so-so"* (Respondent 3). Or as Respondent 4 states, *"I don't think there's that much on there?"*. Other respondents did not even reflect on the intranet as a source for sustainability information. Hence, for Respondent 2, the intranet is a fundamental tool within her practice, but other practices share the notion that the intranet is not valued the same, or at all. A conclusion drawn from this is that the intranet is part of the routinized practice of *informing* about sustainability, but is not part of the practice of *gathering* information about sustainability.

As stated, Reckwitz' (2002) 3rd element of practice focuses on *knowledge* within a practice, but not to be forgotten is the value of *discourse & language* also included in this element. When the respondents reflected upon sustainability within the organization many stated that they could "feel" that these issues are highly valued within the company. I found this interesting because what enables such a feeling? Respondent 2, when asked how she could sense this, directly referred to the new internal communication platform. This platform has its basis in sustainability, both social and environmental. The platform is not a communication tool as such; rather it is a platform stating the values that all (internal and external) communication should reflect. It is interesting though that Respondent 2s' practice, as an information manager, functions very closely to this platform (and has been part of creating it) – so when she says that she can 'feel' the sustainability values within the organization she actually refers to her own practice, which in this case includes the information and marketing department, and the discourse which takes place within it – not the organization as a whole. Discursive practices, in Reckwitz' terms, are practices that through language ascribe meaning to things, situations etc. A discourse is in this sense a routinized way of talking about something, leading it to ascribe meaning to what is taking place within a practice. Other respondents were not as pragmatic when trying to explain where this 'feeling' comes from, yet still claiming to acknowledge it. Instead, what repeatedly came up was the influence from the owners of the company. As a family business, the owners' values have been successfully spread within the organization, leading many respondents to state that it is obvious that sustainability is highly valued within the company because of it. Respondent 7 states: *"I believe that this commitment always have been genuine within our management, a genuine interest for this and you can really tell that there is a will to drive these efforts"*.

Furthermore, the respondents' reflections show that sustainability is highly valued within the organization, either through personal or managerial influence – or both. Discursive practices influence how a practice is interpreted; how sense-making takes place (Reckwitz, 2002), but a question I felt needed to be asked is whether this expressed 'feeling' of integrated sustainability values actually affect how the practice is performed. To analyse this, the next section will discuss Reckwitz' 4th element of practice in regards to how structures and processes can enable certain performance within a practice.

5.2.2 Structures and processes

Reckwitz (2002) argues that structures and processes are created from how something usually is done, from routinized behaviour. Structures are enablers of routines or, in other terms, they state how something is expected to be done within a practice. In the context of the studied organization, structures and processes enable employees to understand how a practice is supposed to be carried out i.e. they structure their behaviour. Respondent 7 for example, states that it is easy for her, in the practice of creating internal education programs, to see the connection between sustainability and her work tasks, stating that since sustainability is present in agreements with contractors *"it's a natural part of the process"*. Respondent 7 here mentions the existence of agreements, something I noticed have a very relevant role in several practices – in the sense of making sense of sustainability within one's own practice. Respondent 5 works with supplier development, a practice in which the organization has set out clear objectives and policies. When asked how he works with sustainability, to acquire an understanding of how his practice is influenced by it, he argues: *"For me it is very apparent in my every day work, when I discuss these issues with other offices or suppliers. Like when an audit needs to be renewed, in that sense, it is very concrete"*. Respondent 6, a designer, refers to the list of prohibited chemicals as an example of how his practice is influenced by sustainability standards, while Respondent 8 states that well-defined processes, as in his case the highly regulated practice of transportation, creates a close connection to his role in the organizations sustainability efforts – since the processes establishing his practice also defines sustainability.

In other practices where policy documents or other forms of defined structures are not as present, the linkage between the meaning of sustainability within the organization and sustainability within one's own practice is not as strong. I would like to link this 'gap' to Reckwitz' (2002) 3rd and 4th elements, *knowledge/discourse* and *structure/processes*. When the respondents reflected on what sustainability means for the organization at large versus what it means in their own practices, it became clear that there was a gap between the knowledge they had about what their practice *should* constitute and what the structures enabled them to actually do. Many respondents showed great understanding for areas in which more sustainable practices should or could be incorporated, but the structures governing the practices limited this development. Respondent 4 states that; *"When I have an assignment where we are supposed to have large margins, sell large volumes, then I feel like, I won't even try"*. What she refers to is that when she is striving to create more sustainable products, processes telling her to do otherwise can hinder this effort. This in turn creates confusion concerning how sustainability is prioritized in her practice, when being given contradictory directives.

Furthermore, contradictory directives is just one example of what visualizes the 'gap' between the respondents knowledge of how to make sense of a practice versus what the structures within the same practice enables. Other respondents state that the awareness of how much sustainability is valued within the organization affects their interpretation of their practices. Respondent 6 (in the practice of designing), for example, states that: *"What is stated in my role description is not exactly what I feel*

22

that my role is. It's a personal feeling of what is expected of me or what I should do, something that needs to be more well-defined in the role description". This is a recurrent reflection from many of the respondents, where they argue that they feel that they should strive towards sustainability, but it is also just that, a feeling. It is not a clear directive; it is not defined in their role descriptions, leading them to wonder what is most prioritized. This could be linked to Feldman & Orlikowskis' (2011) 3rd concept, where the authors states that structures and agents within a practice are mutually constitutive i.e. they affect each other equally. This I believe is pictured by how some of the respondents themselves integrate sustainability within their practices, even when the structures that enable those practices do not do so. In that sense, the agents wish to reconstruct their practices so to that they are able to integrate more sustainable practices.

5.2.3 Making sense of sustainability strategies

After discussing the concept of sustainability, its meaning within the organization and the individual work practices, I moved on to discussing something that could be seen as more pragmatic for the respondents: the sustainability strategies. It soon became clear that how these strategies were defined, how the respondents reflected upon their function and substance highly differed between practices – something that was most apparent between management and other practices further down in the organization. Respondent 1, who as the sustainability manager was part of constructing the strategies states that they affect everything she does, that all her efforts are aimed at following the strategies: *"Since I was involved in developing the strategies, I know what I and the company want and in that sense, I see that everything we do to at least some extent always aims at following that strategy"*. Respondent 2, also a manager, argues along the same lines, stating that everything that she does has a basis in these strategies. In the line of practice theory, it is apparent that the strategies function as structures that enable a practice. Meaning, for Respondent 1 and 2, who both are part of the practice of management, the strategies equal structures that enable a routinized behaviour, visualizing how a practice is supposed to be carried out (Reckwitz, 2002). But this is not consistent among all respondents.

   The interviewed managers have, I would argue, fully incorporated the sustainability strategies in their own work practices; they have through their close connection to them been able to translate them to performance. However, this sense-making is not as enabled by these strategies within other practices. Even though the majority of the respondents were able to explain the sustainability strategies, what they incorporate and why they exist – the respondents found it much more difficult to reflect upon how the strategies actually affect or structure their own practice. Respondent 3 (part of the practice of purchasing), for example, explains: *"I don't think it's that well-defined.... . I feel that it is an overall strategy and I don't think they are so good at breaking it down to a detailed level. Maybe it's more self-interest, that these issues motivate me, then you might try to break it down. But if you're not, if you feel that it's all very foreign and you don't know how to address it, then maybe you ignore it"*. Accordingly, when Respondent 6 (in the practice of design) was asked whether he feels that the strategies affect his everyday work practice, he stated *"Yes, but partly*

because I want them to". What Respondent 3 and 6 touches upon is something I found to be very vital. As stated in Part I of this analysis, I argue that the individual's interest in sustainability affects the agent within a practice and the sense-making which takes place within that practice. As Reckwitz (2002) explains, knowledge within a practice enables the agent to make sense of that practice, while structures constitutes a routine, a way of performing within the practice. What I came to understand from the respondents' reflections is though that there can be a detachment between the knowledge and the structures of a practice. The strategies exist to enable more sustainable practices, to construct a routine, but when there is a lack of knowledge within that same practice in terms of how it is supposed to be accomplished – the agent's role is unclear, affecting the understanding of the structures in place to enable the practice. Respondent 9 (in the practice of design) argues along the same lines as Respondent 3 and 6, stating that "*to be blunt, I think that the company needs to be precise in all our roles, writing down how we should produce in a sustainable manner – not just in broad terms as it is now"*. Respondent 10 (practice of purchasing) also reflect in the same manner, saying that "*It's not enough that you get directives from above, someone needs to actually do it as well"*. What respondent 10 here means is that the strategies might be seen as directives, instructing what the organization wants. However, her experience is that without someone within the department voluntarily incorporating this within their own practice, the strategies stand void.

In relation to this, I find it noteworthy that there is one thing that all the respondents outside of the practice of management connect to the sustainability strategies: goals. Part of the sustainability strategies is set goals on the share of sustainable products (i.e. products consisting of a minimum of 50 % ecological, recycled or other sustainable material) that every department should produce annually. A defined goal is pragmatic and clear. Just as discussed in Part I, sustainability is a complex issue and one way to grasp it is to choose substances of it that are relatable and pragmatic. In Part I this concerned e.g. recycling. Here the same sort of sense-making takes place but this time connected to the sustainability strategies i.e. to grasp their meaning the respondents identify the one thing that is clearly defined – the goals they must meet. Everything else the strategies include are reflected upon just as sustainability in society was reflected upon by the respondents in Part I – as something that must exist, that is important for the development of the organization. Hence, the strategies are by the respondents most commonly described in theoretical terms, but not defined in pragmatic practices.

6.   Discussion

The aim of this study is to develop a better understanding for how sustainability ambitions affect sustainability performance in a retail company. To meet this aim I have employed the research question: *How do actors within a retail company perceive and perform sustainability?* I argued this is a relevant question to answer because previous studies state

24

that it is still unclear what effects organizational sustainability ambitions have on actual performance. I will in this final section of the thesis convey my most important findings in relation to the aim and main research question. I will also relate my findings to previous studies on the subject of integrating sustainability (see chapter 2). So that the discussion would be easier to grasp, I chose to divide the main research question into 2 parts and segmented the chapter accordingly.

6.1 How is sustainability perceived?

This study finds that the perception of sustainability varies between practices, but rarely within them. In the practice of management, there is no confusion concerning the meaning of sustainability. In practices, as transportation management or supplier development, where sustainability directives structure the practice itself, it is easy for the respondents in these practices to relate to sustainability. Other practices where these structures, official or unofficial, do not incorporate sustainability to the same extent, as designing or purchasing, the concept is severely harder to grasp, leaving the respondents to create their own sense-making. This is most commonly done by equating sustainability strategies with goals and target achievements.

Further, as stated in the analysis, almost all respondents claim to acknowledge a 'feeling' of sustainability within the organization, by so perceiving sustainability as valued, stating that managerial influence to a large extent is to credit for this. The Epstein & Buhovacs' (2010) study finds that strong informal structures, as managerial values, are important for the integration of sustainability, something I too have found. A question remaining is though how integrated sustainability values affect performance in practice

The Linnenluecke et al. (2009) study does, in a similar manner as this study, investigate the understandings of sustainability within an organization. Their study suggests that differing subcultures in an organization influence how sustainability is understood. As an example, Linnenluecke et al. states that within a subculture with low awareness about sustainability, individuals perceives corporate sustainability from an economic perspective. This relates to the findings from this study, which conveys that to grasp the concept of sustainability, the respondents strive to concretise the concept to what makes the most sense in their own practice. Accordingly, Harris & Greens' (2002) study identifies the issue of talking about sustainability in an organization. They find, just as I do, that the vagueness of the concept highly restricts the drift towards sustainability.

Much of the previous literature focuses on the perception of sustainability but does not address performance. By applying practice theory, I had the ability to not just look at how well values of sustainability are integrated i.e. the sustainability 'sayings', but also look at the relationship between these 'sayings' and actual 'doings' i.e. sustainability performance. Hence, even though this chapter divides the research question in perception and performance, the study is based on how these relate to each other.

6.2 How is sustainability performed?

The aim with this study was to develop a deeper understanding for how sustainability ambitions affect performance in a retail company. I applied Practice theory to take a step further than the Linnenluecke et al. (2009) and Harris & Crane (2002) study, in that I wanted to investigate how 'sayings' about sustainability affect 'doings', instead of merely studying 'sayings'. As stated in the analysis, the majority of the respondents argue that the sustainability strategies enable an understanding for what the organization strive towards, but lacks in defined definitions according to differing practices. Hence, more well-defined strategies arguably would lead to structures enabling the respondents to integrate sustainability performance in their practices. My reflection from the empirical material is that even though many respondents wish for sustainability strategies that are considerably clearer in what is expected from each practice, some show that they are still able to incorporate them in their own practices. The respondents that show the most motivation for sustainability are also the ones who have been able to, at least to some extent, integrate sustainability in their performance. I found this primarily in the practice of purchasing, which as mentioned in the analysis is a practice functioning close to the 'field' and where I could observe that the respondents had experienced a 'crisis in practice'.

Epstein & Buhovas (2010) argue that formal structures are crucial for full incorporation of sustainability. Accordingly, what I have found is that the respondents seek clearer formal structures to enable more sustainable practices, though what should not be overlooked is the personal initiatives that seem to be the actual enablers of sustainability performance. Drivers for sustainability are not just found in management positions, they too exist in other hierarchal levels of the organization. This matter could also be seen from another perspective. When seeing structures and agents as mutually constitutive (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), one could argue that for this to benefit the process of change encouraged in the strategies, the structures cannot be too strict. There need to be room for flexibility, at least when one is striving to affect these structures. Personal motivation has the ability to lead to innovative solutions, something too strict strategies or directives could hinder.

6.3 Benefits of a Practice theory approach

Interviewing is a practice in itself, a practice where reflexivity is crucial for the validity of the gathered material. Sustainability in particular I believe is difficult to study empirically since it is something many knows you are *expected* to care about, which might influence your reflections. By applying Practice theory I was though able to study the relation between discourses and material practices, instead of solely focusing on discursive practices.

Harris & Crane (2002) and Linnenluecke et al. (2009) both utilize the concept of organizational culture theory for studying the integration of sustainability. While Epstein & Buhovacs' (2010) approach is arguably more pragmatic, the studies share an argumentation for deeper understanding of what motivates an organization to work for sustainability

26

and how such motivation can be put into practice. This leads me to argue for the approach this thesis has towards integrating sustainability – which is to understand the complexity of the issue through investigating practices. Organizational culture theory is the umbrella under which practice theory has developed (Reckwitz, 2002). In contrast to organizational culture theory, practice theory addresses situations/individuals by incorporating a social constructivist perspective, emphasizing interpretation and sense-making (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). By looking at practices I was able to analyse how sense-making took place in and through these practices, an approach I found to be suitable to approaching the diverse understanding of sustainability within an organization. Primarily, this approach allowed me to deepen the understanding for how said understanding affects the integration process along with the performance of sustainability that, wishfully, follows.

7.   Conclusion

To understand how to fully integrate sustainability in an organization, I have in this study found that knowing what is needed to link words to practice is key. Even when sustainability values are incorporated in an organization, there can still be a dissonance between what the values state and what the performance shows. With the aid of Practice theory I was able to deepen the understanding of where this dissonance occurs. By rejecting the dualism of perception and performance, I was able to investigate how perception and performance mutually affect sense-making within an organization. I also found that the indefinability of sustainability need not be a hinder, it need not mean the same for all. Instead, for full integration of sustainability, what is most necessary is that the strategies are defined within each practice and incorporated in the structures that enable it. Thus, a person working with transportation need not define sustainability as something else than what suits his/hers practice to be able to drive the sustainability efforts forward. But, it is important that sustainability directives are translated into doable actions that are relevant for each practice. In terms of practice theory, where action is seen as situational, so should also sustainability be approached.

I believe to have met the aim of this thesis, but I also believe to have visualized a need for future research in the subject. I argue that this thesis portrays a good basis for how to approach the integration of sustainability within an organization, but there are still questions that remain. Further research is demanded if one strives to understand where and by whom in the organization the 'translation' of sustainability into performance should occur.

8.   References

Literature:

Brown et al. (1987) Global sustainability: Toward definition. *Environmental management*, volume 11, Issue 6, pp. 713-719.

Bryman, A. (2008). *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carrol, A., B. (1999) Corporate Social Responsibility – Evolution of a Definitional Construct. *Business Society*, September 1999 vol. 38 no. 3, pp. 268-295.

Crang, M. & Cook, I. (2007) *Doing Ethnographies*. SAGE Publications.

Cresswell, J. W. (2014) *Research design*. 4th Edition. SAGE Publication.

Epstein, M. J., & Buhovac, A., R. (2010) Solving the sustainability implementation challenge. *Organizational Dynamics*, Volume 39, Issue 4, October–December 2010, pp. 306–315. Special Issue: Organizing for Sustainability.

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2007). *Strategisk kommunikation*. Malmö: Holmbergs Malmö AB

Feldman, M. S. & Orlikowski, W. J. (2011) Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory. *Organization Science*. 22(5):1240-1253.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) Five Misunderstanding About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Volume 12 Number 2, April 2006 219-245. Sage Publications.

Hargreaves, T. (2011) Practice-ing behavior change: Applying social practice theory to pro-environmental behaviour change. *Journal of Consumer Culture* (11), pp. 79-99. SAGE Publications.

Harris, C., L., & Crane, A., (2002). The greening of organizational culture. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 15 Iss 3 pp. 214 – 234

Hyde, K. F. (2011) Recognising deductive processes in qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 3 Iss 2 pp. 82 – 90.

Kidd, C., V. (1992). The evolution of sustainability. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics,* March 1992, Volume 5, Issue 1, pp 1-26

Linnenluecke, M., K. et al. (2009) Subcultures and Sustainability Practices: the Impact on Understanding Corporate Sustainability. *Business Strategy and the Environment*. Bus. Strat. Env. 18, pp. 432–452. Wiley InterScience.

Linnenluecke, M., K. & Griffiths, A. (2010). Corporate sustainability and organizational culture. *Journal of World Business,* 45, pp. 357-366.

Merriam, S.B. (1994) *Fallstudien som forskningsmetod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Mirvis et al. (2010). Vision, Mission, Values: Guideposts to sustainability. *Organizational Dynamics,* 39, pp. 316-324.

Ong, B., K. (2012) Grounded Theory Method (GTM) and the Abductive Research Strategy (ARS): a critical analysis of their differences. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15:5, pp. 417-432.

Pohl, M. & Tolhurst, N. (2010) *Responsible Business: How To Manage a CSR Strategy Successfully*. Wiley Publications.

Postill, J. (2010). *Introduction: Theorising media and practice*. In B. Bräuchler and J. Postill (eds) Theorising Media and Practice. Oxford and New York: Berghahn

Reckwitz, A. (2002) Toward a Theory of Social Practices, a Development in Culturalist Theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(2): 243-263. London: Sage Publications

Shiroyama et al., (2012) Governance for sustainability: knowledge integration and multi-actor dimensions in risk management. *Sustain Sci* (2012) 7 (Supplement 1):45–55.

Skudiene, V. & Auruskeviciene, V. (2012). The contribution of corporate social responsibility to Internal employee motivation. *Baltic Journal of Management*, Vol. 7 Iss: 1, pp. 49 – 67

Vera et al. (1993) Situated Action: A symbolic interpretation. *Cognitive Science* 17, pp. 7-48.

Yin, R. K. (2013) *Case Study Research, Design and Methods*. 5th edition. SAGE Publications.

Internet sources:
WCED (1987) *Our Common Future*
http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf (2016-05-04)