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Sustainable Organizational Identity (SOI): A Representative Framework

*Identidade Organizacional Sustentável (IOS):
um framework representativo*




Identidad Organizativa Sostenible (IOS): Un Marco Representativo

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ABSTRACT

Goal: To propose a framework founded on the theoretical bases of organizational identity, organizational sustainability, and sensemaking, one that presents the concept and trajectory for developing a sustainable organizational identity (SOI). **Methodology/approach:** A qualitative-descriptive perspective is adopted, using Jabareen's (2009) guide to building frameworks, which involves: Identifying and defining key concepts; specifying relationships; building diagrams; and continuously evaluating and refining. **Originality/relevance:** Recognizing the need for fundamental changes in the references and meanings attached to building a sustainable organization highlights the relevance of a new identity. This identity should be capable of referencing and being referenced by new meanings and decisions more consistent with sustainability demands. However, the literature review revealed a lack of proposals on both the concept and the process of developing a sustainable organizational identity (SOI). **Main findings:** Triangulating the theoretical bases used allowed for the construction of a framework that explains the trajectory to better understand the concept and relevance of SOI in building sustainable organizations. **Theoretical contributions:** The study bridges a gap that is both conceptual and methodological, since the concept of SOI and the trajectory for its development are defined. **Management contributions:** By clarifying the role of SOI as a guiding and influencing element for new meanings in decision-making, new meanings arise which are socially shared and thus promote both the collective engagement that creates alternatives for achieving sustainability, as well as the new references that support narratives more consistent with the pursuit of organizational sustainability.

Keywords: Sensemaking, organizational sustainability, sustainable organizational identity.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Propor um *framework*, fundamentado nas bases teóricas da Identidade e da Sustentabilidade Organizacional e do Sensemaking, que apresente o conceito e a trajetória para o desenvolvimento de uma Identidade Organizacional Sustentável (IOS). **Metodologia/abordagem:** Adota-se uma perspectiva qualitativo-descritiva, utilizando-se do guia de Jabareen (2009) para a construção de *Frameworks*, o qual envolve: Identificar e definir Conceitos-chave; Especificar Relacionamentos; Construir Diagramas e Avaliar e Refinar recorrentemente. **Originalidade/relevância:** Ao se constatar a necessidade de mudanças basilares nas referências e sentidos que visam a construção de uma organização sustentável, emerge a relevância de uma nova identidade. A qual, seja capaz de referenciar e ser referenciada por novos sentidos e decisões mais condizentes com as demandas da sustentabilidade. Todavia, a revisão da literatura revelou insuficiência de propostas tanto sobre o conceito como sobre o processo de desenvolvimento de uma Identidade Organizacional Sustentável (IOS). **Principais resultados:** A triangulação das bases teóricas utilizadas permitiu o construir de um *Framework* que explica a trajetória para melhor compreender o conceito e a relevância da IOS na construção de organizações sustentáveis. **Contribuições teóricas:** Supre-se, tanto uma lacuna conceitual quanto metodológica, pois define-se o conceito de IOS e a trajetória para seu desenvolvimento. **Contribuição para a gestão:** Ao clarificar o papel da IOS como norteadora e influenciadora de novos significados para as decisões surgem novos sentidos que, compartilhados socialmente, promoverão tanto o engajamento coletivo criador de alternativas para o alcance da sustentabilidade quanto novas referências que sustentem narrativas mais coerentes com a busca pela Sustentabilidade Organizacional.

Palavras-chave: Sensemaking, Sustentabilidade Organizacional, Identidade Organizacional Sustentável.

RESUMEN

Objetivo del Estudio: Proponer un marco teórico fundamentado en las bases de la Identidad Organizacional, la Sostenibilidad Organizacional y el Sensemaking, que presente el concepto y la trayectoria para el desarrollo de una Identidad Organizacional Sostenible (IOS). **Metodología/enfoque:** Se adopta una perspectiva cualitativa-descriptiva, utilizando la guía de Jabareen (2009) para la construcción de marcos, que involucra: identificar y definir conceptos clave; especificar relaciones; construir diagramas; y evaluar y refinar continuamente. **Originalidad/relevancia:** Al reconocer la necesidad de cambios fundamentales en las referencias y significados dirigidos a la construcción de una organización sostenible, emerge la relevancia de una nueva identidad. Esta identidad debe referenciar y ser referenciada por nuevos significados y decisiones que se alineen con las demandas reales de la sostenibilidad. Sin embargo, la revisión de la literatura reveló una insuficiencia de propuestas tanto sobre el concepto como sobre el proceso de desarrollo de una Identidad Organizacional Sostenible (IOS). **Principales resultados:** La triangulación de las bases teóricas utilizadas permitió la construcción de un marco fundamentado en las teorías de la Identidad Organizacional, la Sostenibilidad Organizacional y el Sensemaking. Este marco describe y explica la trayectoria para comprender mejor el concepto, la relevancia y el papel de la IOS en la construcción de organizaciones sostenibles. **Contribuciones teóricas:** Este estudio aborda tanto una laguna conceptual como metodológica al definir el concepto de IOS y delinear su trayectoria de desarrollo. **Contribuciones a la gestión:** Al aclarar el papel de la IOS como un factor orientador e influyente en decisiones, significados e interpretaciones, emergen nuevos significados compartidos que promoverán el compromiso colectivo, creando alternativas para alcanzar la sostenibilidad, así como nuevas referencias para lograr disposiciones organizacionales que respalden niveles más coherentes y satisfactorios en línea con la Sostenibilidad en el Contexto Organizacional.

Palabras clave: Sensemaking, Sostenibilidad Organizacional, Identidad Organizacional Sostenible.

■ INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, since the first UN Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, world leaders have met to discuss environmental protection. These discussions resulted in the creation of programs, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which shed light on environmental degradation and disasters, economic crises, and serious social problems. Therefore, these topics are also discussed and included both in the decision-making guidelines of public and private organizations and in academia. These debates have been driving discussions, reflections and criticism on how the dominant economic system has developed. Among the results are an awareness and recognition of the need to link concerns and criticisms about the damage of non-sustainable development to the strategic decisions of organizations that tend to focus solely on economic development.

In search of global initiatives on the subject that might converge towards effective practices and changes, the United Nations (UN) creates the World Commission on Environment and Development, which in its 1987 report, titled *Our Common Future*, highlights among its goals that “organizations should adapt a sustainable development strategy, re-examine critical environmental issues, and reformulate realistic proposals to address them.” As a recommendation, it proposes a new notion of development, expressed by the term “sustainable development (SD),” which involves a “transformation process capable of harmonizing and strengthening the present and future potential for meeting human needs and aspirations (Comissão Mundial Sobre Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, 1988, p. 49).

However, considering the past, present, and future of the needs of different generations exposes the limits of current and predominant organizational identities (OI), which conduct their decisions under the aegis of an economic, short-term rationality (Landrum, 2017; Zanten & Tulder, 2021). Thus emerges the need for new and updated organizational identities, based on new and/or complementary rationalities, ones that are capable of promoting and giving meaning to a development model that addresses economic, social, and environmental issues and challenges simultaneously, while respecting their respective time cycles. Bansal & Desjardine (2014) warn that sustainability forces companies to make intertemporal compensations to ensure equity between generations. The notion of “time” distinguishes sustainability from social responsibility and other concepts; omitting the temporal factor in most strategic management contributes short-termism, which is the main obstacle to achieving sustainability.

Among the paradigms presented by Gladwin, Kenelly, and Krauze (1995) to enable sustainable development in an organizational context, i.e., technocentrism, ecocentrism, and sustaincentrism, we will adopt this last as a reference, as this paradigm represents a dialectical and emerging effort to combine technocentric and ecocentric values in a worldview that prioritizes sustainable development. Sustaincentrism aims to reconcile technology

exploitation and respect for nature, promoting the integration of opposing scientific positions. This approach emphasizes the need to harmonize human progress with environmental preservation, offering an intermediate path that allows economic advances without compromising natural ecosystems.

When searching for research in databases such as EBSCO, WEB OF SCIENCE, SPELL, and GOOGLE SCHOLAR, particularly research already addressing the foundations and development of the concept of sustainable organizational identity (SOI), only two articles directly related to the theme were found, none of them from Brazil: Bouncken et al. (2022) and Frostenson et al. (2022). No articles were found proposing how to develop SOI. However, triangulating the theoretical bases yields important justifications for proposing it, and these justifications will be presented subsequently to this section. Among the most objective are: Bouncken et al. (2022), who emphasize that in dealing with challenges related to sustainability and ecological transformation, companies lack an OI that demonstrates their holistic attachment to elements that lead to sustainability and ecological transformation; and Frostenson et al. (2022), who present the sustainability-oriented OI as a social construction based on perceptions of the core business operations as “sustainable in themselves.” Something that also implies collaborative work with customers and suppliers perceived as involved in sustainable solutions.

According to He & Brown (2013), previous research found that employees’ perception on the status of their organization’s identity as a sustainable organization, for example, increases their likelihood of developing a strong identification. This identification will lead employees to take actions that are consistent with the precepts upheld by the organizational identity. Frostenson et al. (2022) highlight a misconception in the current emphases for achieving sustainability, since identity has relatively little to do with formal controls such as codes, policies, and reports used by the management to position the company as sustainable. Instead, the process of building itself as sustainable is based on its members’ underlying beliefs about its main operations and whether it possesses the specific abilities that it manifests in its relationship with customers and other audiences. Jaich (2022) sheds light on the role of identity by reinforcing that employees first identify with the purposes of their organization and then develop attitudes that are in accordance with the corresponding internal norms. In other words, filling out a report for a particular “Guide” or meeting ISO standards’ criteria without relating with their meaning for sustainability tends not to generate effective changes in identity.

In this context, it is inferred that a change towards new action and management practices that lead to decisions aligned with sustainable precepts requires changes in conceptions about the roles of organizations in, and their impact on (Hamilton & Gioia, 2009) the dominant development model. This change can be directly associated with questioning the current OI. Therefore, as pointed out by Caniglia et al. (2020), in a context of sought-after transformations, the promotion of individual actions connected in time, even if unexpected sometimes, should reflect views and values of the actors involved. OI can be defined as the synthesis of the beliefs shared by members about what they see as the central, distinctive, and relatively enduring characteristics of their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, et al. 2013). These characteristics allow us to answer “who we are” as a sustainable organization, for example. Zagenczyk and Powell (2022) found

that the alternation of behaviors and values depends on an evaluation of self in relation to others through comparison, including a “judgment” of the expansion of status and influence to those who are closer to the prototype of identity that defines expected behaviors as the appropriate ones for the members of a group.

Simons and Sabastiani (2017) corroborate the relevance of the connection between corporate identity and sustainability. In an empirical study conducted in two countries in southern Europe with retailers engaged in seeking corporate sustainability, they identified a fusion of corporate sustainability ideas with corporate identity, something that reflected on companies’ strategies; corporate identity was found to be instrumentally used to operationalize corporate sustainability strategies. In summary, the study brought three important contributions regarding the advantages of building an organizational identity connected to OS: 1) it demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between corporate sustainability and corporate identity; 2) it identified a trajectory for integrating corporate sustainability and corporate identity at both the strategic and operational levels; and 3) it identified distinct patterns for interfaces between corporate sustainability and corporate identity. In short, the connection in question does not occur naturally, there has to be structuring elements and an intention to develop it.

Although these justifications confirm the need for an SOI, its proposition is complex. This is because it must foster actors’ imaginative and continuous creation of possible future action trajectories, ones in which the structures they received (i.e., principles, qualifications, and values of a sustainable organization) to guide thoughts and actions can be configured and reconfigured creatively in relation to their hopes, fears, and desires. Something that reinforces the connection of the concepts of organizational identity and sustainability with the foundations of sensemaking. This is because sensemaking refers to the process by which members seek to reduce existing ambiguities and assign meanings, starting from ongoing events and based on an identity that can be preserved or reformulated throughout this process (Weick, 1995). The production of meanings over time denotes a process that organizes experiences and also determines actions in the context where organizations are situated (Weick, 1995; Cristofaro, 2022). Perey (2015) says that the successful enactment of a sustainable organization is related with establishing communicative spaces that validate the “new” identity and support it with “new” narratives that help reduce and/or enhance the collective understanding of the polysemy of voices. In stronger terms, addressing the polysemy inherent in the term ‘sustainability’ requires that those who speak be clear about the meaning they would like the listener to understand, e.g., by being explicit about its central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics. Thus, bringing organizational sustainability (OS), sensemaking, and OI together raises questions that require new answers—still little explored in academia—about the characteristics that significantly represent this “new” and relevant sustainable organizational identity. Considering the justifications above, a framework will be proposed based on the theoretical bases of organizational identity, organizational sustainability, and sensemaking—a framework that presents a concept and trajectory for developing a sustainable organizational identity (SOI). It is proposed that a sustainable organizational identity (SOI) can both reference and be referenced by the pursuits and achievements of the structural, structuring, and relational fac-

tors that accommodate the perceptions, communication of meanings, and behaviors necessary to enable sustainability in an organizational context. By shedding light on the factors that influence the sources and processes of organizational decisions and actions involved in understanding and developing an SOI, the study aims to contribute theoretically and logically to reducing the complexity in its composition and development trajectory, outlining relational and recursive components that highlight the relevance of and need for connecting SOI and OS. Thus, the study seeks to demonstrate that the interactive-explanatory-recursive trajectory of SOI construction, by helping to endorse, question, and guide decisions, can intervene in the words, values, and plans of those who study the subject and those who implement it in organizations. This path invites the search for actions aligned with the “voices” that will reinforce the SOI in its procedural, dynamic, participatory, negotiated, and conflicting nature.

By covering concomitant and recurrent explanations, the framework underscores that the relevance and viability of OS depends on a new identity, as the social understanding and behavior to effectively deal with sustainability need to fully make sense to those involved, something that will involve changes that affect the status quo (Bouncken et al., 2022). Enhancing the production of meaning and the construction of new meanings that promote sustainable practices beyond processes focused only on eco-efficiency and short-term results tends to promote effective ways of developing actions compatible with the construction of SO (Munck, 2015; Bansal and Sharma 2022, Zantem & Tulder, 2021).

The article is organized into **seven parts**: i) this introduction; ii) organizational identity; iii) organizational sensemaking; IV) organizational sustainability; V) methodological procedures; vi) representative framework; vii) final considerations. The concepts and characteristics of the terms that make up this article are explained below: Organizational identity, organizational sensemaking, and organizational sustainability.

■ ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY (OI)

Studies on OI have been receiving more attention since the seminal article by Albert and Whetten, published in 1985 and titled *Organizational Identity*. In that study, the authors propose that organizations also possess an identity, i.e., the characteristics that define a being and distinguish it from others can be transposed to an organization. Thus, the term is conceptualized as follows: beliefs shared by members about a set of characteristics that reveal what is central, distinctive, and enduring in an organization; these are still considered the three pillars that underpin the term. The question of “who I am” is presented as essential for the concept of identity, and from an organizational perspective, it refers to the reflection about “who we are as an organization” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Corley et al., 2006; Gioia, 1998; Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt et al., 2016; Whetten, 2006).

The study of Gioia et al. (2013) elevates “identity” to an essential concept for helping to make sense and explain action. It positions it as one of the most relevant for an organization to study itself. Thus, understanding who the organization is and what it represents both internally and externally

is fundamental if OI is to truly reflect the sustainable assumptions necessary for an SOI to develop. A recent study by Poroli and Cooren (2023) demonstrated the potential of organizational identity to appease a polyphony of voices about what is involved in building corporate social responsibility (CSR). With this role, OI leads a collective to listen to the various voices in a way that makes sense to everyone. They work by organizing responses that are also collectively built about “who we are as a socially responsible organization.”

Gioia et al (2010) found that both the social construction and the views of social actors regarding identity-related processes were not only relevant to forming organizational identity, but these processes were also mutually constitutive in creating a functional identity. He and Brown (2013) emphasize that while OI has been extensively researched, the existing literature has not yet given sufficient attention to a number of important issues that offer huge opportunities for progress. Among the opportunities, there is room for efforts to explain OI based on the behavior of individuals, groups, and leaders in the search for better performance or organizational change.

The study by Patvardhan (2012) found a number of challenges and complicating factors when addressing OI, including the following: Identity gaps, which refer to the cognitive distance between the perception of one's current identity and what is ideal or intended, i.e., there is a temporal challenge for a change to take place; cognitive inertia: OI acts as a filter that influences how members interpret and process both routine and new issues. Thus, it tends to foster decision trajectories that are better known to members. Fridman and Gershon (2023) demonstrated that the threat to the identity of a group that decides solely based on economic issues, for example, may prevent supporting a group that seeks SOI, for considering it as opposed to their interests.

Multiple possibilities to ignore or devalue the role of OI have been found. However, it cannot be denied that this may generate ambiguities and disconnected, contradictory narratives about who the organization is. As an example, we have organizational identities that reinforce decisions that aim for profit at any cost, while working to secure prominence in sustainability reports.

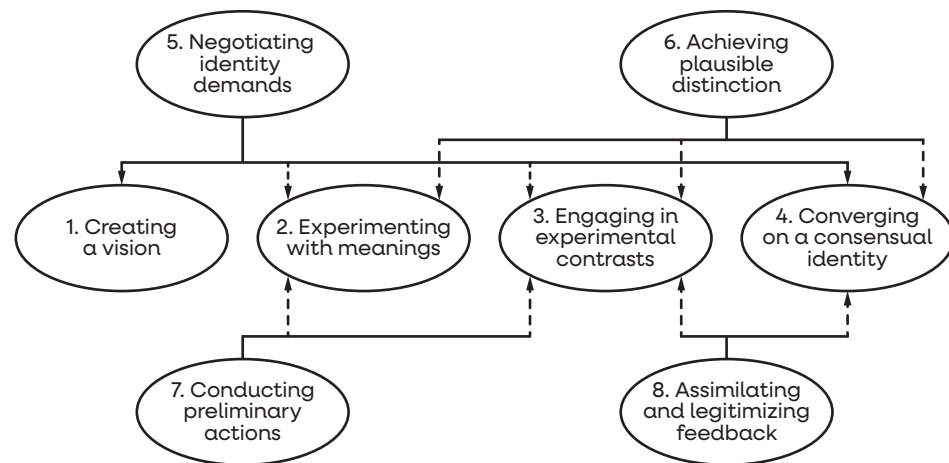
Whetten (2006, p. 220) explains that while the concept of organizational identity may lack conceptual homogeneity, what is clear is that organizational identity deals with the creation of a self-referential meaning. Corley (2006, p. 87) points out that the process of defining an identity implies questions such as “Who are we?” and “Who do we want to become?” over a certain period of time.

Gioia et al. (2010), when empirically analyzing the development of OI in the context of creating a new college, proposed a model (Figure 1) to understand the OI-forming process. The model consists of eight processes or stages, four of which are primary in nature (and can follow a sequence); while the other four are recurrent in nature (and may connect to other sequential steps). In the first step, based on the preliminary allegations, the founders demarcate the contours of the eventual OI, and directly or indirectly discard others. In the second step, the content of an undefined identity suggests to the founding members experimenting with a void of meaning (“We don't know what it means to be who we think we'd like to be”). The company members filled out that space by asking themselves “What are we not?” In the next stage, the members began to fill out aspects of their identity by engaging

in experimental contrasts in which they compared their previous personal experiences with the experiences in the new organization. This stage allowed a better understanding by the members of how the organization was similar to and different from others in its environment. In the fourth and final stage, the members began to form a consensus about what they believed were the organization's central and distinctive features, which would conduct their future actions. Based on the previous stages, they were able to move beyond merely agreeing on who they were not, to reach agreement on the affirmative aspects of who they were as an organization (Gioia et al., 2010, 2013).

Figure 1.

Theoretical model of the organizational identity formation process



Note. reproduced from Gioia et al. (2013, p.158).

In addition to these four more or less sequential stages of identity formation, a series of topics were included that were associated with recurrent stages as follows: v) negotiating collective identity claims, in which agreements were attempted, leading to suggestions on the possible identity; vi) conducting “preliminary actions,” which consisted of provisional structuring activities for a new identity configuration; vii) reaching an ideal distinction by seeking to be similar, yet distinct, based on a group of reference; and viii) assimilating and legitimizing feedback, which involves affirming the validity of their identity-related beliefs, and/or indicating identity areas that required additional clarification due to internal discrepancies and/or divergence from the external public (Gioia et al., 2010; 2013).

Once it is formed, the OI is said to develop a sense of itself, implying its ability to produce meaning (Weick, Suitcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) for the organization itself and for those who recognize it, which offers some solidity. Additionally, the OI provides guidance for members on what the organization should do and how other organizations should seek to relate to it (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

■ ORGANIZATIONAL SENSEMAKING

In view of the above, we highlight the relevance of the sensemaking aspects (meaning construction – Weick, 1979) and sensegiving processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) to promote an understanding of and build meanings in organizations. This is because this construction corresponds to an organizational activity in which the actors interpret the environment and assign meanings to the events in progress, which determine and are determined by identity and, consequently, by actions (Weick et al., 2005). Considering that the reality faced by companies does not exist objectively, but is enacted by the organizations' members, the determinants of human intentionality are decisive for understanding the directions taken in organizational adaptation. From a co-evolutionary and circular perspective, the sensemaking cycle positions OI as reference for decision-making (Weick, 1979; Wass et al., 2014; Cavenaghi & Munck, 2019; Cristofaro, 2022).

Organizational sensemaking is an approach that demonstrates how information flows, whether from within or outside the organization, are interpreted by the meanings shared among the individuals involved (Weick, 1995). According to Correa et al. (2014, p. 1), sensemaking reveals that “it is through social interaction that individuals seek to assign meaning to new information, aiming to reduce the degree of ambiguity, and thus enabling the analysis of elements of daily organizational life at a micro level”. Therefore, it is by building meanings that understanding is sought regarding why and how the considerations that led to organizational choices came about. Thus, sensemaking seeks to transform circumstances into a situation that is explicitly understood (as through words), which serves as a “springboard” for action (Weick, et al., 2005).

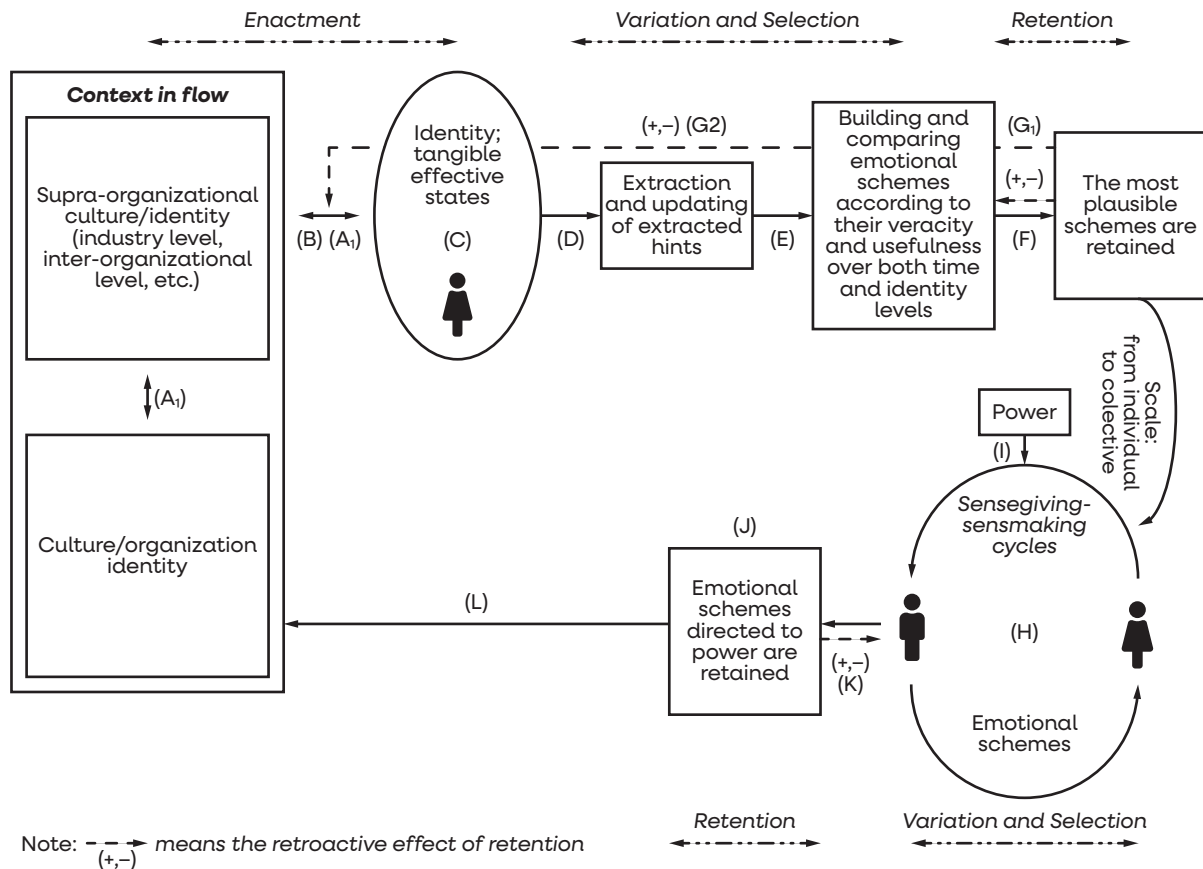
From an organizational-context sensemaking perspective, two complements are important for the propositions of connections in question: sensegiving and sensebreaking. (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The former concerns the process of boosting and trying to influence sensemaking for the interpretation of organizational reality by others, i.e., influencing the construction of meanings towards a preferred redefinition of the organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The latter, sensebreaking (Pratt et al, 2016), comprises the destruction or breaking of a particular meaning, and is often considered a prelude to sensegiving. In this situation, leaders or organizations fill out an empty meaning with a new meaning, so that this action will encourage people to reconsider the meaning that has been valid thus far and question their implied or understood assumptions, thus re-examining their course of action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

The organizational sensemaking process occurs through the relationship between *enactment* (i.e., the promulgation of meanings) and *organizing* (processes involving environmental change, enactment, selection, and retention), which can be understood in the following sequential manner: i) the involvement of a reciprocal relationship between environmental change (the environment being formed by the information that individuals react to) and enactment (the creation of possible scenarios based on the information received), thus establishing a flow of continuous updating; ii) the projection of scenarios, which provide the possible meanings; iii) the process of selection (of meanings) is obtained, in which the number of possible meanings is reduced by means of hints extracted in retrospect; iv) the retention process,

through which the plausible story (narrative) gains solidity (i.e., it reinforces or nurtures an identity); and v) feedback is presented, returning to interpretation and action (Weick et al., 2005). Figure 2, presented by Christofaro (2022), summarizes classical and current contributions that demonstrate this process.

Figure 2.

Organizational sensemaking model



By developing the three main elements, the following is the case: In *enactment*, individuals begin to collect the signals sent by the environment and promote the creation of a new context, where possible alternatives of meaning are created as a kind of scenario prospection, and some specific hints and relations between them are sought for interpretation (Weick, 1995). This occurs retrospectively, through communication between individuals, based on past knowledge and organizational and individual experiences. In the selection stage, the flow of information and possible meanings created through *enactment* or environmental changes is selected in order to decrease ambiguity and misconceptions in search of a plausible result. Mental models, retrospective analysis, and verbalization are used. In retention, the meanings created are preserved in the organizational sphere, that is, the storage process results from the construction of meanings of the previously created environments. This “memory” influences new enactment and selection processes. Organizing translates a sequence of ecological changes—involving enactment-selection-retention—with retention and feedback into the three previous processes occurring simultaneously (Weick, et al., 2005).

Therefore, it can be inferred that organizational sensemaking allows for reflecting about events and decisions on whether or not to be sustainable, for example. Identity is at the root of this concept, which influences how other processes of meaning production are understood in organizations. Weick (1995) and Weick et al. (2005) say that what we think we are (identity) shapes what we enact/deed and how we interpret certain events, which affects what those from the outside think we are (image) and how they treat us, stabilizing or not our identity.

Munck and Tomiotto (2019) demonstrated that discrepancies between the meaning attributed to sustainability in the strategic framework of the studied company and the meaning identified in actions aimed at sustainability act as potential sources of internal resistance that can compromise long-term results, undermining the effectiveness of actions and decisions regarding an idealized sustainable identity.

Cristofaro (2022) intentionally repositions identity in the enactment stage due to the convergence of purposes guided by it and the ongoing ecological change, confirming its property as a socially situated construction. This view is still supported by Scoones et al. (2020), the authors say that promoting of transformation is closely related to the possibility of connecting human agency, values, and capabilities as prerequisites for achieving collective action towards something. In this context, it is possible to connect organizational sustainability as a practice to be built, because it would represent a new collective action that depends on new meanings encouraged, reinforced, and changed by a new identity and vice versa.

■ ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY (OS)

Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause (1995) summarize three paradigms for studying sustainability. 1) Technocentrism: This paradigm has its roots in the 17th-century Scientific Revolution and is influenced by a liberal social vision and the economic theory of Adam Smith's "invisible hand." It values human rationality and the idea that nature exists to be explored for the benefit of human progress. In technocentrism, economic development and the efficient use of natural resources are a priority, making it attractive to current economic systems and management models, which emphasize growth and technological exploitation. 2) Ecocentrism: This paradigm represents a vision that places nature and the planet at the center of concerns, defending a lifestyle in harmony with the natural environment. Inspired by preservationist and transcendental movements, ecocentrism advocates a "deep ecology," which rejects the idea that human beings must dominate nature. Instead, it promotes reverence and respect for the planet, defending sustainability, and preserving ecosystems as a priority. 3) Sustaincentrism: this approach is inspired by the demands of life's universalism; it is concerned with quality of life and the defense of moral pluralism; it has the human being as part of nature, and superior to it in intellect; it offers a vision of development that is based both on people and nature conservation; it has economic and human activities as intrinsically linked to natural systems; it is not contrary to technology, but does not accept it as a critical form; and proposes that it should be developed and used in a way that is adequate, fair, and humane. The present work is founded on this approach and considers that it comprises

important precepts of sustainable development in its economic, social, and environmental integrity.

Wass et al. (2014) warn that considering sustainability from a procedural decision-making perspective can bring it beyond a rhetorical concept to expand its power, becoming able not only to “guide action”, but also to “generate action”. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret how the guiding principles of OS are organized; structure the information that supports decision-making, considering its multidimensional complexity (social, economic, and environmental); communicate clearly the guiding elements involved in the decision-making process focused on OS; and finally clarify the practical implications of not following them.

Using the terminology suggested by the literature (Dylick & Hockerts, 2002; Jamali, 2006; Munck, 2013; Cavenaghi & Munck, 2019), we define the three pillars of OS as follows: Economic sustainability refers to the ability to carry out organizational activities responsibly, presenting a satisfactory profitability without which it would not survive and perpetuate (Dylick & Hockerts, 2002); environmental sustainability concerns the preservation, conservation, and management of natural resources, with organizations being aware of the impacts of their activity on the natural ecosystem, seeking to minimize its negative consequences and increase its positive ones (Munck, 2013). And social sustainability, which refers to the impacts on the social system in which a particular organization operates, these impacts being aimed at inclusion, education, and quality of life, for example, and they can take place at a local, national, and/or global level. Considering the above definitions, sustainability in an organizational context should seek to balance what is at once desirable, viable, and necessary in economic, environmental, and social terms in a given context and period (Dylick & Hockerts, 2002; Jamali, 2006; Munck, 2013).

Munck (2015) complements these approaches by highlighting the need to consider the different time-space scales involved in decision-making, because unlike what most OI prioritize, i.e., an economic result in the shortest possible time, social change involves generations, and environmental change, centuries. Landrum (2017) considers that the most advanced stages of corporate sustainability involve not only thinking about the future, but also repairing the damage already caused to the system, thus incorporating a concern for both cooperation and the self-management of resource consumption. Glynn, Lockwood, and Raffaelli (2015) point out that in the corporate sphere, the continuity, durability, and coherence of sustainable practices require fundamental changes in the status quo of organizational identities built under the predominance of economic rationality parameters.

Given the above, it is confirmed that the attribution of new meanings which enable building an SOI requires not only profound reflections about the trade-offs (i.e., intelligent choices between decision-making priorities that cover at once economic, environmental, and social issues), but also tangible plans to guide identity changes towards the OS. These changes promote an organizational and systemic representation of economic, social, and environmental feasibility considering different time and space scales for each of them, from a long-term perspective.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Because this study addresses a phenomenon that is complex, social, and dynamic without quantification support, a qualitative-descriptive approach was chosen (Liebscher, 1998). Jabareen (2009) emphasizes the importance of a philosophical foundation in developing the conceptual framework which, by being treated as a framework, is seen from a perspective that allows the researchers to interpret and understand a phenomenon holistically through the integration of various concepts and theories. The construction of the framework used the method proposed by Jabareen (2009), which outlines the following steps to build a conceptual framework. Clearly defining the problem or phenomenon under investigation; conducting a comprehensive review to understand existing theories and concepts related to the research problem; selecting key concepts that are relevant for the research problem; clearly defining and operationalizing the selected concepts; identifying and articulating the relationships between the concepts; creating visual representations (diagrams) of the conceptual framework; continuously evaluating and refining the framework based on emerging feedback and perceptions.

Thus, with the problem clearly defined, the literature was mapped and reviewed using scientific articles and books found in search platforms such as Capes Journals, SciELO, and Google Scholar. The criterion adopted was each work's relevance to the topic, identifying particularly the most relevant studies for each approach and those connected directly with SOI. Only two articles were found to directly address the construction of a sustainable organization's identity. In the databases researched, searches were conducted using keywords or phrases such as the following for the abstracts: organizational identity and sustainability; identity and sustainable organization; corporate identity and sustainability; and identity and sustainable corporate governance. These searches returned only 2 works, namely Bouncken et al. (2022) and Frostenson et al. (2022), which presented some forced proximity to the central research topic (SOI).

The review allowed identifying the main characteristics of the concepts used in the study (see Table 1); then, by analyzing the selected works, it was possible to understand and categorize each contribution for later integrating the definitions of each studied concept through diagrams (see Figure 3).

The definition of SOI derived from the fundamental characteristics of sustainability in an organizational context, which respond to what is central (principles), enduring (values), and distinctive (qualifications) in a given space and time for guiding both understanding and practice in relation to the definition of who we are as a sustainable organization (see figure 3). In a sensemaking process, the responses collectively built about who we are and who we want to be as a sustainable organization strengthen its practice and promote the attachment of the sustainability precepts previously disseminated and the subsequent social representation of their characteristics in the daily decision-making process.

In sum, this study considered the definition of OI proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) and complemented by Gioia et al. (2010; 2013); the integrative theoretical approaches and their developments as proposed by Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause (1995) and Landrum (2017), as they adhere satisfactorily to SD premises in an organizational context; representative studies applied

to the pursuit of sustainability in an organizational context (Cavenaghi & Munch, 2019; Landrum, 2017; Munch, 2013, 2015); and papers on sustainability which are related to OI issues (Bouncken et al., 2022, Frostenson et al, 2022, Jaich, 2022; Perey, 2015; Hamilton & Gioia, 2009; Munck, 2015; Valente, 2012).

The summarization of the definitions, made possible through the continuous evaluation and refinement of the theoretical framework based on the feedback and perceptions that emerged from those involved in the validation process, is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3.

Operational concept definitions

Concept	Definition	References
OI	It refers to who we are as an organization based on the beliefs shared by members about what is central, distinctive, and enduring over a certain period of time in the organization.	Albert & Whetten (1985); Corley (2006); Whetten (2006); Gioia et al. (2013)
OS	Organizational and systemic representation of the economic, social, and environmental feasibility, considering different time and space scales for each of them, from a long-term perspective.	Gladwin, Kenelly & Krause (1995); Dyllick & Rockerts (2002); Munck (2013; 2015); Landrum (2017); Cavenaghi & Munck, 2019
Org. Sensemaking	The process by which meanings are assigned to organizational events in order to reduce existing ambiguities and produce meaning, based on identity, retrospectiveness, and plausibility.	Cristofaro (2022); Weick (1995); Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, (2005)
SOI	It refers to understanding who we are as a sustainable organization. The starting point is the enactment of central, distinctive, and continuous (enduring) characteristics of sustainability in an organizational context. (See a full definition in Figure 3.)	Albert & Whetten (1985); Bouncken et al. (2022); Frostenson et al. (2022); Cristofaro (2022); Hamilton & Gioia (2009); Gioia et al (2013); Munck (2013; 2015) Landrum, (2017);

The last stage in the adopted methodology involves the validation of the theoretical framework built. According to Jabareen (2009), the researcher themselves should evaluate comparatively the quality of their theoretical elaboration. Next, the study sought validation by “strangers” through conferences, seminars, or other kinds of academic structure that provide feedback. The framework went through validation using two criteria: presentation and debate in four 50-minute seminars involving master’s students and a professor of “Sustainability Management in an Organizational Context” from the master’s program in administration at a public university in the south of Brazil. Those involved got to ask questions about the proposed concepts and connections, suggest new authors, and question their practical applicability. At each meeting, suggestions were added, and the design was improved. Next, the framework was sent to three researchers who have been studying the subject for more than five years. They provided important contributions in two rounds. In sum, in the first round, they suggested improvements to how the concepts used were put together, as well as improvements in the description of the proposed interaction; in the second round, within a 30-day interval, they agreed with the positions established for the conceptualization of each component and with the SOI construction cycle. After having been validated by the expert professors, it was presented again to those involved

in the seminars, who also validated the robustness of the work. The process lasted 280 days, the 60 initial days being dedicated to the seminar presentation; to the consultation of the experts, another 180 days were dedicated, and to the final presentation in the seminar and reviews, 40 days.

Below is the trajectory for building the framework, as well as its contributions to developing an SOI.

■ FRAMEWORK – ATTRIBUTES AND ELEMENTS FOR DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY (SOI)

According to Gioia et al. (2010, 2013), Valente (2012), and Munck (2015), new organizational actions are desired or appropriate within a social system governed by beliefs, values, and norms linked to an OI, in this case an SOI. Some references such as external audits; GRI standard sustainability reports; corporate governance; and environmental legislation provide a basis for validating behaviors regarding SOI statements. At this stage, feedback and social legitimation clarify to all the involved the difference between an OI coined on the aegis of economic rationality and an SOI.

The SOI construction process integrates the new attributes to the organization's strategic and operational decisions (Simons & Sabastiani, 2017), and over time, they consolidate the SOI. Next, as shown in Figure 4, the conceptual basis of SOI which specifies and differentiates such attributes was synthesized.

Figure 4.

Sustainable organizational identity conceptual chart

SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY		
The definition of SOI derived from the fundamental characteristics of sustainability in an organizational context, considering what is central (principles), distinctive (qualifications), and enduring (values) within a given space and time for guiding the collective understanding about who we are as a sustainable organization. The SOI should be fluid, dynamic, meaningful, and consistent with the pursuit and achievement of sustainability goals in an organizational context.		
Central characteristics (principles)	Distinctive characteristics (qualifications)	Characteristics Enduring (values)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A systemic and holistic vision; ■ Broad levels of accountability and transparency; ■ Collective sense ■ Long-term commitments ■ Broad dialogue with stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Socioeconomic position; ■ Socio-environmental justice ■ Eco-efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Innovation for sustainability; ■ Integration of the three pillars of SO to the decision-making process; ■ Consideration of the different space-time realities for the three pillars of SO in the creation of strategies; ■ Profound reflections on the trade-offs and meanings given to sustainability (economic, environmental, and social)

Nota. Based on Zagenczyk and Powell (2023); Bansal and Sharma (2022); Cristofaro (2022); Bouncken et al. (2022); Frostenson et al. (2022); Landrum (2017); Hamilton and Gioia (2009); Gioia et al. (2013); Munck (2013; 2015); Cavenaghi and Munck (2019).

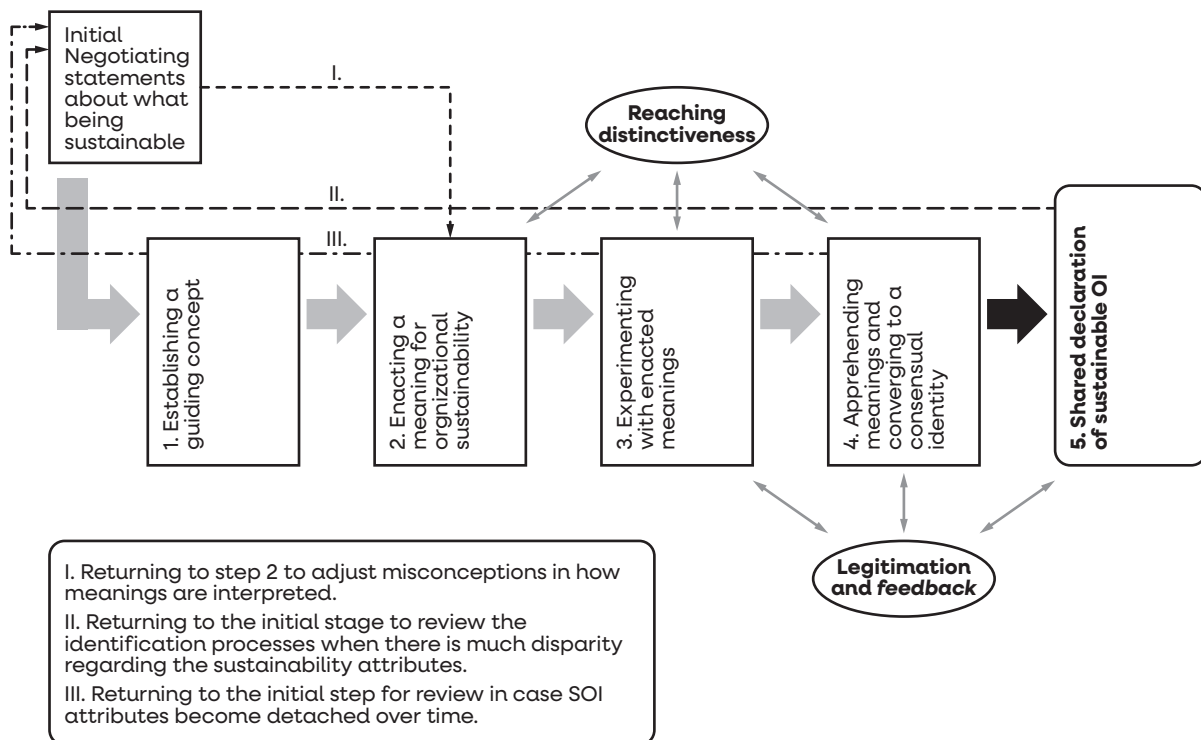
It is noted that the distinctive attributes presented (qualifications) are those that represent the main singularities of a sustainable organization, while the central attributes (principles) are not exclusive to a sustainable organization,

but provide foundations for its formation. The enduring attributes (values) provide an expectation of consistency and coherence over time, ensuring a concern for the past, present, and future of generations. Therefore, SOI is characterized as fluid, dynamic, significant, and consistent with the pursuit and achievement of sustainability goals in an organizational context. These objectives are aimed at meeting the principles, values, and distinctiveness of a sustainable organization.

Highlighting SOI provides a contribution to reaching, albeit temporarily, a shared meaning of the desired attributes because, according to Oliveira & Cavedon (2013), individuals exhibit mechanisms to affirm, adapt, or reconstruct their identities in order to generate, justify or refute their identification with an organization. If there are differences, then returning to the “second stage” is recommended. Thus, the alignment between SOI and the decisions to achieve it is maintained on an ongoing basis. In the framework, these situations are demonstrated respectively by paths (I) and (II). Analyzing the assimilation levels allows maintaining SOI statements updated and consensual.

Figure 5.

Framework representing the development of a sustainable organizational identity (SOI).



Thus, the process of developing the new identity starts with an initial stage (0), which formalizes the beginning of the process and involves the “negotiation of statements about what being sustainable is or is not” in an organizational context. Considering the organization’s history with sustainable statements and practices, in particular its leaders begin to experience a process of searching and reviewing ideas, purposes, and interests that result in the best possible definition. Support through parallel training on the subject is invaluable (Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2013). This stage also involves analyzing

the environment and external requirements, such as stakeholder pressure and legal requirements (United Nations, 2015) to address any structural crises (Gioia et al., 2010). These may imply some organizational change that will impact the process (Valente, 2012); or supporting reflections on whether or not to meet the organization's own "will" regarding external demands.

After this initial alignment, the following steps are taken: (1) choosing, in a discussed, deliberate, and well-founded manner a sustainability concept to guide the development of SOI (Eccles, Perkins & Serafeim, 2012; Bouncken et al., 2022); (2) "Enacting a meaning for sustainability" – sensegiving. This involves promoting meanings that can be interpreted and experienced in the organization according to their plausibility (Weick, 1995) to drive organizational actions that reinforce the attributes of a developing identity. At this stage, members know the new concept, but do not really know what it means to be or to act accordingly, so they need to create meanings associated with who they are trying to become. Some examples of actions taken at this point are: designing strategic plans for sustainability and formulating policies and principles for the organization (Gioia et al., 2010, Gioia & Hamilton 2016). At this stage, the distinction begins by examining what is or is not similar to the sustainable propositions in that social and relational context that is being experienced (Gioia et al., 2013; Hamilton & Gioia, 2009). Possible narratives and preliminary actions are outlined in the face of the imminent enactment of new meanings about being a sustainable organization.

In stage (3), called "experiencing/experimenting with meanings enacted for sustainability," members actually act in function of those meanings and perceived aspects of the concept, which were enacted in the previous stage. The new way of acting must be configured in different organizational decision-making activities, such as in the formulation and execution of OS-oriented programs that allow showing characteristics that reinforce identification with the new concept. The experimentation with new behaviors and new ways of doing work, although temporary, fills out the "void of meanings," because they involve experiential contrasts (Gioia et al., 2010) and the "identity prototypes" help mobilize behaviors (Zagenczyk & Powell, 2023).

Through the practices they experience and through comparison with other organizations, the organization members seek to extract new meanings and select hints for the SOI with a view to reducing evident or emerging ambiguities, since, as noted by Weick (1995) and reinforced by Christofaro (2022), understanding meanings depends on the enactment of meanings that are seen retrospectively. Meanings with fewer ambiguities and greater plausibility are selected through comparisons between the organization's history and the reality currently experienced, and attributes that promote internal and external recognition of the new desired characteristics are confirmed or not.

In step (4), the new meanings are apprehended and a convergence occurs towards a "collectively negotiated identity," and the organization begins to adopt behaviors that will be consistent with its SOI and the meanings attached to it, thus showing fundamental attributes of a sustainable organization (Figure 3). Its members concur (Gioia & Hamilton 2016; Bouncken et al., 2022) on how to act in relation to the SOI, mainly because they have extracted hints that allowed them to reduce ambiguities about the meanings, making them plausible, reasonable, and coherent for those involved (Weick, 1995).

In stage (5), i.e., the shared statement of SOI, the identity gains meaning by sharing its new attributes and creating an expectation of con-

tinuity over time (Whetten, 2006; Gioia & Hamilton 2016). Periodic reviews will be guided by the signals given by the SOI in a continuous, fluid, and relational flow. At this point, the verification of social legitimation via feedback is important, as it reinforces the SOI or indicates the need for review or updating. If necessary, in case attributes become detached from it, or if members wish a higher level of contribution to sustainable development, the process returns to the initial stage. In the framework, this moment is shown by path (III).

■ FINAL REMARKS

In sum, the theoretical connections that were made revealed that the development of SOI should be dynamic, fluid, and orderly. Its occurrence suggests a relatively long period that might establish a guiding concept, enact shared meanings for sustainability, and engage in a social and collective understanding of its new differentiating characteristics. Respect for the different time-space scales of the economic, social, and environmental pillars of OS requires a greater organizational effort to overcome immediate-oriented decision-making. Thus, the framework serves as a reference to instigate changes in consolidated instances of OI that reinforce an intensive management solely focused on financial and short-term results.

The general contribution of this article is a conceptual and theoretical one: It clarifies and modifies identity and OS concepts, while developing a multi-element tool that explains the interrelationships to define and achieve an SOI. This conceptual and theoretical synthesis provides a response to critics of identity theory and OS, who claim that identity theory is not a coherent theory, but a combination of disparate theoretical mechanisms in which relationships and distinctions between organizations, culture, decisions, and identities are not always clear or consistent. The synthesis postulates that identities are sociocultural constructions that provide models for organizing decision-making, and that they are therefore always present. Similarly, this synthesis emphasizes how sustainability and identities are not two disconnected phenomena, but are rather shaped by collective action in networks of practitioners that are both committed and situated at different organizational levels—strategic, tactical, and operational. Despite its complexity, SOI itself is not sufficient to reach OS, but represents a relevant and critical advance towards it.

The proposed framework allows us to deduce that introducing sustainability in organizations only as a discourse, without practical implications that create a new OI, tries to limit its effective advance, because the actions will remain without a new shared meaning of what being sustainable is for those involved, considering principles, values, and distinctiveness. The possible new responses that are required about the reasons for being a sustainable organization will remain unchanged or only partially changed if the new meanings are not properly shared. However, based on the proposed framework, a means has been reached for promoting a collective understanding of an SOI that is capable of promoting sustainability in an organizational context.

Indeed, the development of SOI induces respect for the decision-making integration of the three pillars of OS, as well as their different time scales to take place. It also deepens the possibilities for interpreting the

impacts of immediate-oriented and isolated approaches to the projects considered for making an organization sustainable. Therefore, as the trajectory to reach SOI unfolds, the commitments undertaken act in reducing voices which were “hidden” or silenced in narratives that cause tension in the clash over what being sustainable really is.

Regarding the study’s limitations, it is worth noting that it does not address directly the political and power influences involved in an identity change. We suggest approaching these in future models, or in models that act as a point of attention in implementation processes. For while the need for a new identity to reach OS is evident, dominant groups can resist and choose to keep the OI focused on eco-efficiency, or even on profit at all costs.

As suggestions for future studies, we recommend: a) using the proposed framework as methodological support for the empirical observation of gains when SOI is achieved; b) in-depth analyses of the reasons for spreading OS narratives detached from an SOI; c) advancing studies on scalable reputation gains by consolidating an SOI; d) finally, from a practical perspective, developing studies that demonstrate the effort savings of actually being sustainable rather than merely appearing sustainable.



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