Through the looking glass

The emergence, evolution and embedding of sustainability accounting in a family business

Maughan, R.

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This study extends and deepens our understanding of why and how organisational sustainability activities and accounting unfold and embed over time. It presents a longitudinal case study examining the emergence and evolution of an environmental management system, environmental management accounting, sustainability reporting, and a sustainability programme in a large, family-owned group of companies. The case analysis is theoretically framed using the concepts of organisational identity and internal legitimation.

The study reveals an enduring interplay between the organisation’s sustainability programme and its organisational identity and internal legitimation processes. It demonstrates how key participants in the sustainability programme used a variety of strategies to seek legitimacy for the programme from internal audiences and powerful stakeholders while also engaging in their own legitimacy (re)evaluations. While prior research has identified a set of strategies for establishing external legitimacy, this study finds that legitimating ‘identity talk’ is an important additional mechanism in the process of establishing internal legitimacy for new organisational activities.

In contrast with prior research, the study uncovers how external sustainability reporting can be a by-product of other sustainability-related activities rather than an organisation’s primary medium (or output) of the process of engaging with sustainability. The study shows how despite a highly supportive organisational environment, external sustainability reporting may be weakly and temporarily legitimised within an organisation rather than institutionalised.
Through the Looking Glass:
The emergence, evolution and embedding of sustainability accounting in a family business

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ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

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ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties
ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel

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Dedication

For Alan, Matthew and Naomi, with love.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... xii

List of Acronyms ............................................................................................................. xiii

List of Tables ...................................................................................................................... xiv

List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... xv

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Research Intent and Questions .................................................................................. 3
  1.2 Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................. 4
  1.3 Research Methods ...................................................................................................... 5
  1.4 Research Contributions .............................................................................................. 6
  1.5 Thesis Structure ......................................................................................................... 7

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 10
  2.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 10
  2.2 Conceptualising Sustainability ................................................................................. 10
    2.2.1 Organisational Sustainability ........................................................................... 10
    2.2.2 Accounting for Sustainability ......................................................................... 12
  2.3 The Emergence, Evolution and Embedding of Sustainability Accounting ............... 13
    2.3.1 The Emergence of External Sustainability Reporting ..................................... 13
    2.3.2 Diversity in Corporate Sustainability Reporting ............................................ 15
    2.3.3 Engagement-based Studies of Sustainability Accounting .............................. 17
  2.4 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 21

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework .................................................................................... 22
  3.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 22
  3.2 Organisational Identity .............................................................................................. 22
    3.2.1 Conceptualising Organisational Identity ......................................................... 23
    3.2.2 Identity as Process and Claims ....................................................................... 28
    3.2.3 Mobilisation of Organisational Identity for this Study .................................... 29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Voluntary Reporting</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 Community-Based and Multiple Models of Retailing</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Case Site Review</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 Company and Family Governance</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Current Operations and Business Model</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Overview of the Group’s Engagement with Sustainability</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Introduction to the Case Findings</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Organisational Identity at the CC Group</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Identity Work</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Identity Claims at the CC Groups</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Family Claims</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2 Value-Based Claims</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3 Business Model Claims</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4 Long-Term Perspective</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Enacted Identity</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.1 Interactions with Retailers</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.2 Interactions with Suppliers</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.3 Interactions with the CC Family</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The Emergence, Evolution and (Partial) Embedding of Environmental Management and Accounting</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Introduction</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 An External Prompt</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Evaluating Environmental Management</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Lack of Internal Support</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.2.4 2006.................................................................................................................. 137
9.2.5 2008.................................................................................................................. 137
9.2.6 2010.................................................................................................................. 137
9.2.7 2012.................................................................................................................. 138
9.3 The Emergence of External Reporting................................................................. 138
  9.3.1 Reporting as a Natural Progression................................................................. 139
  9.3.2 Reporting Based on Performance .................................................................. 140
9.4 Internal Legitimating External Reporting 2002 to 2006 ...................................... 142
  9.4.1 Seeking Procedural Legitimacy for Reporting ................................................. 143
  9.4.2 Seeking Consequential Legitimacy for the Reports........................................ 144
  9.4.3 Seeking Pragmatic Legitimacy for the Reports.............................................. 145
  9.4.4 Legitimacy Evaluations ................................................................................. 146
  9.4.5 The Environment Executive’s Legitimacy Evaluations .................................. 148
9.5 Losing Internal Support 2008 to 2012................................................................. 151
9.6 Chapter Summary............................................................................................... 153
Chapter 10: Summary and Discussion .................................................................... 154
  10.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 154
  10.2 Case Discussion................................................................................................ 154
    10.2.1 Identity Claims, Enacted Identity and Identity Work.................................... 156
    10.2.2 External Trigger and Preliminary Legitimation .......................................... 157
    10.2.3 New Organisational Activities................................................................... 158
    10.2.4 Main Legitimation...................................................................................... 158
    10.2.5 Building Legitimacy with Managers and Retailers .................................... 159
    10.2.6 Building Legitimacy with Employees......................................................... 159
    10.2.7 Building Legitimacy with the Family Directors ......................................... 160
    10.2.8 Embedding the Sustainability Programme ............................................... 162
10.3 External Reporting ........................................................................................................... 163
  10.3.1 Seeking Legitimacy for the External Reports ......................................................... 165
  10.3.2 Re-Evaluating the Legitimacy of the External Reports ........................................... 165
10.4 Policy Implications ......................................................................................................... 167
10.5 Theoretical Implications of the Study ........................................................................... 169
10.6 Chapter Summary .......................................................................................................... 172

Chapter 11: Conclusions ...................................................................................................... 173
  11.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 173
  11.2 Overview of the Study ................................................................................................. 173
  11.3 Research Findings ....................................................................................................... 173
  11.4 Research Contributions .............................................................................................. 175
    11.4.1 Limitations and Future Research ........................................................................... 176

References ............................................................................................................................ 178
Appendix A: Document Index ............................................................................................ 193
Appendix B: Interview Index ............................................................................................... 195
Appendix C: Master Interview Guide (Round One) ............................................................ 199
Appendix D: Master Interview Guide for Group Members (Round Two) ......................... 202
Appendix E: Master Interview Guide for Retailers (Round Two) ........................................ 205
Appendix G: Illustrative Quotes of Organisational Identity Claims .................................... 208
Appendix H: Overview of Social and Environmental Activities and Projects Implemented between 1998 and 2006 ........................................................................................................... 215
Appendix I: Overview of Sustainability Activities and Projects Implemented between 2007 and 2013 ............................................................................................................................ 219
Samenvattend Hoofdstuk (Dutch Summary Chapter) ....................................................... 221
Inleiding ............................................................................................................................... 221
Onderzoeksopzet en -vragen ............................................................................................ 222
Theoretisch kader ...............................................................................................................................................222
Onderzoeksmethoden .......................................................................................................................................224
Onderzoeksbijdragen .........................................................................................................................................225
About the Author ...............................................................................................................................................227
Abstract

This study extends and deepens our understanding of why and how organisational sustainability activities and accounting unfold and embed over time. It presents a longitudinal case study examining the emergence and evolution of an environmental management system, environmental management accounting, sustainability reporting, and a sustainability programme in a large, family-owned group of companies. The case analysis is theoretically framed using the concepts of organisational identity and internal legitimation.

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## List of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCRPI</td>
<td>CC Retail Partners Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCWS</td>
<td>CC Wholesale Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
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<td>DJSI</td>
<td>Dow Jones Sustainability Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAT</td>
<td>Environmental Action Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMS</td>
<td>Environmental Management System</td>
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<td>GRI</td>
<td>Global Reporting Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMCG</td>
<td>Fast Moving Consumer Goods</td>
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<td>KPIs</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicators</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>NI</td>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>OI</td>
<td>Organisational Identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROI</td>
<td>Republic of Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNWCED</td>
<td>United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Summary of Suchman's Typology of Legitimacy ........................................34
Table 4.1 Contrasting Common Research Approaches in the Social Sciences ..............43
Table 4.2 Data Structure ..................................................................................................62
Table 7.1 Comparison of Environmental and Social Data Reported in 2001 and 2006 ....109
Table 10.1 Summary of Case Analysis ...........................................................................168
List of Figures

Figure 4.1 Overview of the Research Process and Outputs .......................................................... 51
Figure 4.2 Embedding a New (Sustainability) Process ................................................................. 60
Figure 4.3 Chronology of the Emergence, Evolution and (Partial) Embedding of the Sustainability Programme ........................................................................................................... 61
Figure 5.1 Visual Overview of the CC Group’s External Sustainability Reports, 2001–2012. ........................................................................................................................................... 75
Figure 5.2 CC Group Environmental Performance Graphs, 2006 – 2011 ............................. 76
Figure 5.3 Timeline of Sustainability Developments and Projects 1998 to 2013 .......... 77
Figure 7.1 Chronology of the Emergence, Evolution and Embedding of the Environmental Management System (EMS), 1998–2007 ........................................................................ 96
Figure 7.2 Overview of Environmental Activities from 1998 to 2006 .............................. 115
Figure 8.1 Chronology of the Emergence, Evolution and Embedding of the Sustainability programme 2003–2012 ................................................................................................... 118
Figure 8.2 Overview of Environmental Activities from 2007 to 2013 .............................. 130
Figure 9.1 Chronology of the Emergence, Evolution and Non-Embedding of External Sustainability Reporting, 1998–2012 .................................................................................. 134
Figure 9.2 Chart of Report Volume, Tables and Graphs, 2001 to 2012 .............................. 135
Figure 10.1 Embedding a New (Sustainability) Process ............................................................. 155