Toward Sustainable Development:
Micro-Level Explorations in Management Research

Dissertation

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines Doktors der
Wirtschaftswissenschaften (Dr. rer. pol.)
der Fakultät I der Universität Vechta

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Berlin
2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the many individuals who have played a significant role in the completion of this doctoral thesis. While an exhaustive list remains beyond reach, I genuinely appreciate those who have left an indelible mark on this academic and personal venture.

First, I extend my sincere appreciation to Prof. Dr. Nick Lin-Hi who truly allowed this endeavor to become an enriching journey. I am deeply grateful for the liberties he has given me, granting me the autonomy to explore diverse interests, projects, and avenues. His tireless commitment, fearless approach, and prompt availability for urgent enquiries have been remarkable. I would like to thank him for opening doors ‘towards sustainable development`, for challenging discussions, and for his unwavering trust in my capabilities.

Further, I would like to thank my dedicated and resourceful co-authors Dr. Tammo Straatmann, Dr. Igor Blumberg, and Katharina Schäfer as well as the rest of my encouraging and enjoyable team, Marlene Reimer, Johanna Böttcher, and Kerstin Gerke. Their collective expertise and efforts have enriched this work. Especially, I would like to thank Celine Bökemeyer for the wonderful blend of harmony and efficiency and for a collaboration that has been a joy and privilege. Finally, I would like to wholeheartedly thank Luca Haensse, for sharing the joys and sorrows of this journey, for providing invaluable advice – both scientific and personal, for engaging in heartfelt discussions, for collaborative synergy, and for plenty moments of shared laughter. I am profoundly grateful for his presence and immense support throughout this time.

I would also like to acknowledge the doctorial committee and especially Prof. Dr. Vanessa Mertins for reviewing my dissertation thesis and for her cooperative efforts.
I thank Petra Tecker for her infectious cheerful manner and unfailingly prompt and reliable support in conquering bureaucratic challenges.
My gratitude extends to the Chair of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Osnabrück, whose guidance and cooperative spirit have been an invaluable resource.
Also, I am deeply thankful to all project collaborators, from those at KTC in China to the GIZ in Pakistan for the remarkable cooperation and the shared dedication. Special thanks are due to Romina Kochius and Muhammad Ubaid for their contagious commitment to driving change, their devotion to the projects and their trust in our competence.
To all the managers, employees, and individuals, who took the time to participate in the studies that constitute my thesis: My sincere thanks.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my ever-supportive family, particularly my parents, Beate and Klaus, as well as my brother Fabian and his partner Sina. Their unwavering – at times even unrealistic – belief in my abilities and lifelong encouragement are important pillars upon which this work is built.

To my friends, a wholehearted thank you for providing balance, motivation, and constant encouragement. A special thank you goes out to two women, Thea and Johanna, who have been a source of strength, inspiration and wisdom, helping me navigate the challenges and triumphs along this academic pursuit and personal growth.

Finally, I would like to thank Henri for making the weight of this journey feel so much lighter. Your enduring support, sense of humor, and understanding of life's genuine priorities have been a constant source of comfort and joy. I thank you for unconditionally having my back on this journey.

List of Appended Papers

This dissertation is based on the work described in the following papers:

Lin-Hi, N.*, Hollands, L.*, Blumberg, I., & Straatmann, T. (in process of publication). The bright side of digitalization: A field experiment on the effects of e-HRM on employee turnover and internal CSR.

Lin-Hi, N., Schäfer, K., Blumberg, I., & Hollands, L. (2022). The omnivore's paradox and consumer acceptance of cultured meat: An experimental investigation into the role of perceived organizational competence and excitement. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *338*, 130593. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.130593

Lin-Hi, N.*, Haensse, L.*, Hollands, L., & Blumberg, I. (2023). The role of ethics in technology acceptance: Analyzing resistance to new health technologies on the example of a COVID-19 contact-tracing app. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1080/12460125.2023.2171390

Hollands, L., Haensse, L., & Lin-Hi, N. (2023). The how and why of organizational resilience: a mixed-methods study on facilitators and consequences of organizational resilience throughout a crisis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science.* 1-45. https://doi.org/10.1177/00218863231165785

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Abstract

The pursuit of sustainable development is a pressing challenge for today's global society. Despite broad academic consensus on the need to transition towards more sustainable and resilient pathways, in practice shortcomings in the implementation and management of sustainability remain. The scientific discourse on sustainability management extends over various domains and perspectives, with a predominant focus on the macro- and meso-level of analysis. In contrast the micro-level literature on sustainability management is comparatively limited but growing, with the potential to deepen and broaden the understanding of sustainability. Within the micro-level research stream, scholars have pointed to promising avenues such as emphasizing more social elements and well-being, taking a glance across borders, exploiting the methodological toolbox and leveling up while investigating the micro-level. Collectively, the four articles advance on these avenues and address a wide range of sustainability management questions, contexts and stakeholders. In doing so, the present dissertation aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of sustainability phenomena through a socio-psychological lens and a focus on the individual.

Framework Paper

1.1 Introduction

The fundamental challenge at the heart of global society today is sustainable development. The impending climate crisis and the threat of tipping points "too risky to bet against" (Lenton et al., 2019, p. 592) demonstrate the urgency of addressing pathways toward a sustainable future. Moreover, the climate crisis has been accompanied by a series of other grand challenges in recent years, including the financial crisis, the migrant crisis, the crisis of critical consciousness, the COVID-19 crisis (Wickert et al., 2021), and most prominently at present, the Russia-Ukraine war. In view of these challenges, the difficulty of meeting the needs of the people and the planet in the future is mirrored in the characterization of sustainable development as a *wicked problem* of modern society (Blok et al., 2016; Pryshlakivsky & Searcy, 2013; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

A number of debates in the public discourse addressing this wicked problem have been underway for a considerable period of time. Almost 50 years ago, the Club of Rome with its report *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) was the initial driving force behind the public debate on the topic of globally sustainable development. Fifteen years later in 1987, the major definition "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 43) was coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This initially vague framing stimulated a broad discussion of the issue in the late 1980s and 1990s (Aguirre, 2002), gaining particular momentum through the Rio summit with its Agenda 21 in 1992. The debate has culminated (but not terminated) in the United Nations (UN) report *Transforming Our World* and the announcement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to guide the world's development to 2030 (UN, 2015). Echoed by a wide range of practitioners, scientists, governments, and non-governmental organizations, sustainable development has nowadays been embraced as the new development paradigm (Bansal, 2019; Mensah, 2019). Accordingly, decision- and policymakers around the world have sought to incorporate sustainability strategies into both political and business development.

Despite the consensus in the academic world about the need for a shift towards more sustainable and resilient pathways (Ergene et al., 2021; George et al., 2016; Wickert et al., 2021), in practice there are persistent shortcomings in realizing and managing sustainable development. According to experts, the risk of irreversible changes in critical Earth-system processes exists (Griggs et al., 2013) as certain critical boundaries have already been crossed

and others are under intense pressure (Rockström et al., 2009; Whiteman et al., 2013). In a similar vein, in its latest assessment report the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes the urgent need for a global systemic transformation and deep reductions in greenhouse gases in all regions and sectors of the world due to dire circumstances the world finds itself in (Pörtner et al., 2022). Simultaneously, humanitarian and social challenges, such as poverty, inequality, wars, limited access to food and clean water, remain, further highlighting the lack of sustainable development (George et al., 2016; Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020). Overall, the pressing need to address the shortcomings while working towards sustainable development underscores the need for additional scholarly research.

1.2 The Scientific Debate on Sustainability Management

In the scientific debate, the concept of sustainable development has been addressed across a broad variety of domains. Scholars from the field of environmental science (Cramer et al., 2018; Du Pisani, 2006), as well as representatives from disciplines such as sociology (Burns, 2016; Lindsey & Darby, 2019), psychology (Di Fabio, 2017; Rehman et al., 2022), biology (Golberg et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2022), engineering (Ghanbari et al., 2015; Kathirvel & Sreekumaran, 2021), political science (Agrawal et al., 2015; Wanner, 2015), and management science (Bansal, 2005; Teece, 2007) are all engaged in research on sustainable development. According to a review by Zemigala (2019), environmental science is the leading discipline in the scientific debate around sustainability, and management sciences ranked 6th after social sciences, engineering, energy science, as well as agricultural and biological science. Nevertheless, management sciences play a significant role in the scientific debate around sustainable development since "[...] business practices are at the heart of many of the complex issues captured by the SDGs" (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019, p. 358).

Historically, the publications on sustainability in management sciences can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s (Anderson, 1960; Bowen, 1953; Friedman, 1962). Yet, it was not until the early 1990s, along with the growing international interest in sustainability, as evidenced for instance by the Brundtland Commission of 1987, that the topic of sustainable development really made its way into the management literature (Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022). Research communities started to emerge (e.g., Academy of Management's Organizations and the Natural Environment interest group in 1994), and journals focusing on management and its implications for sustainability (e.g., Organization & Environment in 1987 or Business Strategy and the Environment in 1991) were established (Ergene et al., 2021). Since the 2000s, the body of sustainability literature in management science has grown nonstop, suggesting that

challenges in realizing sustainable development measures continue to emerge (Zemigala, 2019). Over the last decade, the growth rate of the management literature on sustainability has even outpaced that of the conventional management literature, indicating a trend certain to continue as the expanding scope and scale of the grand challenges become apparent in societal discourse (Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022).

The increasing salience of sustainability issues in the management literature has resulted in a rich history of research. Across the field, sustainability has been addressed from different foci, such as the SDGs (Caiado et al., 2018; Pizzi et al., 2020), ethics (Goodpaster, 1991; Schaltegger & Burritt, 2018), paradox (Epstein et al., 2015; Hahn et al., 2014), and resilience (DesJardine et al., 2019; Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016), and various terms have entered the discussion, including sustainable development, corporate sustainability, corporate citizenship, corporate social performance, and corporate social responsibility, terms which have often been used interchangeably (Glavas, 2016; Okoye, 2009). While some scholars rightfully underline the importance of clearly distinguishing between the different terms (Bansal & Song, 2017; Montiel, 2008), the present dissertation uses sustainability management as an umbrella term. Even though a clear differentiation can facilitate construct clarity and help to avoid the blurring of various concepts (Suddaby, 2010), the framework chapter is not intended to assign the individual articles to different streams of research. This dissertation instead aims to embed the individual articles into a broader framing shared by the scientific community. The concept of sustainability management can thereby act as a foundation for a variety of research questions on the broader phenomena of sustainability. In the following, sustainability management will be understood as "the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability-related decisions and actions", as put forward by Starik and Kanashiro (2013, p. 12) with reference to previous work by Bell and Morse (2008), Dunphy et al. (2000), Elkington (1997), Laszlo (2003), and Stead and Stead (2004).

1.2.1 Core Concepts, Prominent Theoretical Frameworks and Central Debates in the Sustainability Management Literature

According to a recent review by Dordi and Palaschuk (2022), discussions of sustainability have emerged across various subfields of management, including accounting (Gond et al., 2012; Krüger, 2015), marketing (Luchs et al., 2010; Vorhies & Morgan, 2005), general business (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and information systems (Nilashi et al., 2015; Nishant et al., 2020). The authors identify organizational behavior and human resource management (Dumont et al., 2016; Rupp & Mallory, 2015) as a comparatively

less involved subfield, while scholars from industrial relations (Fitzgerald & Hardy, 2010; Meardi et al., 2012), strategy (Sharma, 2000; Teece, 2007), and technology and innovation (Lopes et al., 2017; Song et al., 2019) were those most engaged with sustainability. Similarly, when Hallinger (2020) analyzed the knowledge base of sustainability management, he noted a large number of publications in the field of innovation management and particularly influential concepts stemming from strategic management. In his meta-analysis, he also highlights a strong engagement of supply chain management as a discipline, with key topics that developed in sustainability management debates, such as circular economy (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Genovese et al., 2017), lean supply chain management (Dües et al., 2013; Martínez-Jurado & Moyano-Fuentes, 2014) and risk management (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Giannakis & Papadopoulos, 2016). The most influential conceptual approaches, however, were largely associated with strategic management (Hallinger, 2020), including shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Porter & Kramer, 2019), dynamic capabilities (Aragón-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007), competitive advantage (McWilliams & Siegel, 2011; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Shrivastava, 1995), absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Delmas et al., 2011; Zahra & George, 2002), and triple bottom line (Elkington, 1994; 1997). The triple bottom line approach, and its message to reconcile the environmental, social and economic dimensions, today still often forms the core of the sustainability concept in the management literature (Isil & Hernke, 2017; Tregidga et al., 2018).

In terms of theoretical foundations, institutional theory (Campbell, 2007; King et al., 2005), stakeholder theory (Buysse & Verbeke, 2003; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984), and the resource-based view (Aragón-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Hart, 1995; Hart & Dowell, 2011) have progressed to the most prominent theoretical frameworks in the debate around sustainability management (Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022; Hoffman & Georg, 2013; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). Besides the application of classical management theories in the field, systems thinking is gaining popularity as an approach with the potential to account for the interactions of organizations with the social-ecological systems surrounding them (Bansal et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2017). Systems thinking offers a holistic perspective that can facilitate a better understanding of the complexity that economic, social and ecological systems bring about and support in identifying a system's potential vulnerabilities as well as opportunities for positive change (Holling, 2001).

Across the field of sustainability management, several conversations centered around the theoretical approaches outlined above and some debates have gained particular prominence. Two exemplary conversations that have been especially salient and that have nurtured the

evolution of sustainability management literature arise from a strategic perspective seeking to demonstrate that being green or good is worthwhile (Bansal & Song, 2017). Specifically, a major body of research was and still is concerned with establishing a link between social and financial performance (Bansal & Song, 2017; Barnett et al., 2020; Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2013). Likewise, management research on sustainability has emphasized the relationship between a corporation's environmental performance and its financial outcomes (Bansal & Song, 2017; Hoffman & Georg, 2013). In this context, publications around the greening of management debate further strengthen the argument for inclusion of the natural environment as an important pillar in addition to social and economic considerations (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2013).

1.2.2 Levels of Analysis Across the Sustainability Management Literature

Apart from adopting various conceptual approaches and developing diverse thematic streams, sustainability management research also differs in terms of the level of analysis. Given that sustainability is a complex phenomenon resonating across societies and institutions, organizations, and individuals (Glavas & Radic, 2019; Starik & Kanashiro, 2013) three main levels can be distinguished, i.e. the macro-, meso-, and micro-level.

At the macro-level, components such as communities, countries or cultures, institutional arrangements, sectors or associations are the focus. On this level, sustainability management scholars review for instance how complex configurations both maintain and mitigate major challenges, such as climate change (Knox-Hayes & Levy, 2011), poverty (Minogue, 2008) or inequality (Greer & Doellgast, 2017). Sustainability management research at this level involves the wider political, institutional, economic and societal dynamics in which an organization is embedded in (Jones et al., 2017). Here, articles have focused for instance on standards and certification (Delmas, 2002; Orcos et al., 2018), industry self-regulation (Dashwood, 2014; King & Lenox, 2000), environmental regulation (Du et al., 2021; Nehrt, 1998) or country effects (Cai et al., 2016; Ioannou & Serafeim, 2012).

At the meso-level, theory and research scrutinizes organizations' sustainability-related decisions and actions. While a major portion of the literature concentrates on corporations, including SMEs and MNEs, a number of management scholars have directed their organizational focus on sustainability research towards cities (da Silva et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2012), universities (Alshuwaikhat & Abubakar, 2008; Kolb et al., 2017), non-profits (Guthrie et al., 2010; Lin-Hi et al., 2015), and the public sector (Adams et al., 2014; Hancock et al., 2018). Key debates on the organizational level have centered on organizational culture

(Howard-Grenville, 2006; Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010), supply chain management (Sarkis, 2003; Savaskan et al., 2004), reporting (Domingues et al., 2017; Thijssens et al., 2016), and more. Insights from various market sectors, such as tourism (Jamal & Camargo, 2014), food (Marcus & Anderson, 2006), energy (Talbot & Boiral, 2018), and textiles (Distelhorst et al., 2017), have been generated, and articles have drawn attention to organizations in different regional contexts. Meso-level research on corporations has explored, among others, the influence of firm motives (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Paulraj, 2009) and values (Bansal, 2003; Rubio-Andrés & Abril, 2023), or structural factors and governance (Bhambri & Sonnenfeld, 1988; de Villiers et al., 2011) on corporate sustainability. Finally, outcomes of firm-level sustainable practices, including financial performance (Miroshnychenko et al., 2017; Waddock & Graves, 1997), or firm capabilities (Nidumolu et al., 2009; Sharma & Vredenburg, 1998), have received attention.

At the micro-level, research targets sustainability management decisions and actions related to individuals. Individual level sustainability management research has also often been discussed under the rubric micro-foundations, i.e. foundations of sustainability management that relate to individual (inter)actions (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Strauss et al., 2017). Here, various articles address employees as the focal stakeholders. In that respect, management scholars have discussed employees' conceptualizations of their corporation's sustainability (De Roeck & Maon, 2018; Seivwright & Unsworth, 2016) as well as their attitudinal and behavioral reactions to their organization's sustainable practices, for instance in terms of employer attractiveness (Lin-Hi et al., 2019; Merlin & Chen, 2022), organizational identification (De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012; Kim et al., 2010), intention to stay (Jones, 2010) or to leave (Hansen et al., 2011), organizational citizenship behavior (Anwar et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2015), and voice behavior (Ilkhanizadeh & Karatepe, 2017; Lin-Hi et al., 2022). Other articles have explored how employees' behavior can contribute to their corporations' sustainability (Tripathi et al., 2019; Xie & Zhu, 2020) and what drives their engagement in sustainable practices (Boiral et al., 2015; Lamm et al., 2013). Apart from the focus on employees, other studies centered on job seekers (Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones et al., 2014), customers (Mohr & Webb, 2005; Russell et al., 2016), and individuals as members of society (Unsworth et al., 2016).[1]

Reflecting the theoretical trends and research streams outlined in the previous section, sustainable management has often been conceptualized at the macro and organizational levels (Carmeli et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Lee, 2008; Wang et al., 2016). Consequently,

[1] Due to differing definitions of levels of analysis across fields and scholars, for clarity, this dissertation follows the approach to subsume a broad range of individuals under the micro-level label (cf. Jones et al., 2017; Shea & Hawn, 2019; Starik & Kanashiro, 2013).

management scholarship has noted the comparatively limited amount of research on the individual level of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Akhtar et al., 2018; Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Tripathi et al., 2019). More recently, scholars have noted more interest in the individual level of analysis across the sustainable management literature (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Gond & Moser, 2021; Xing & Starik, 2017), as reflected for instance in the publication of special issues (Andersson et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Morgeson et al., 2013), a thematic symposium (Jones et al., 2019), a research topic collection (Glavas et al., 2017) or edited volumes (Huffman et al., 2013; Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013). To date, micro-foundational research has been informed by various disciplinary backgrounds, such as organizational behavior, industrial and organizational psychology, sociology, and management studies (Gond & Moser, 2021). As a result, a growing body of empirical evidence is taking shape in areas, such as sustainable human resource management (Dumont et al., 2016; Pellegrini et al., 2018), entrepreneurship (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019; Thelken & de Jong, 2020), strategy (Sharma, 2000; Stevens et al., 2005), and leadership (Khan et al., 2019; Robertson & Barling, 2013).

1.3 Potentials of a Micro-level Approach in Sustainability Management Research

The macro- and meso-level sustainability research tends to emphasize relationships between higher-level entities, such as businesses and organizations and provides information about sustainability management effects in relation to broader concepts, for instance strategy, structure, efficacy, and performance (Cooper et al., 2017). While these perspectives are important, micro-foundations have the potential to inform research and theory about what behaviors and attitudes underpin decisions, actions, and effects in sustainability management (Carmeli et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2017). By investigating mechanisms at the granular level, micro-foundational research attempts to unpack and decrypt aggregates (Barney & Felin, 2013). In so doing, micro-foundations enhance understanding of how organizational outcomes are being shaped by individual-level factors and how macro-level phenomena emerge (Felin et al., 2012; 2015). Thus, without taking macro-level research for granted, micro-foundations yield the potential to open up black-boxes in macro-macro relationships by analyzing the origins and evolution of collective phenomena as functions of individual choices and social interactions (Barney & Felin, 2013). Against this backdrop, in sustainability research it has been pointed out that by advancing a processual understanding of behavioral patterns, micro-foundational research might disentangle competing perspectives and provide a translation mechanism or bridge between different views (Cooper et al., 2017).

Further, in sustainability research attention has been drawn to the difficulty that by their very nature grand challenges often tend to be rather abstract, messy, and difficult to investigate (Wickert et al., 2021). In this light, scholars have suggested breaking down the broader societal issues into smaller and more definable research questions to maximize empirical precision and actionability of the results (George et al., 2016; Wickert et al., 2021). Micro-research, arguably, offers the opportunity to investigate a myriad of inter-meshed micro-phenomena or to further prepare the grounds for a more nuanced look at multi-level interactions, taking into account tangible micro-processes (Cooper et al., 2017; Felin et al., 2015). Together, micro- and multi-level elements of research can create a larger, more multifaceted picture and promote a concrete movement towards a sustainable development.

In sum, numerous scholars in sustainability management research have pointed to the potential of the growing and rich micro-foundational research stream to deepen and broaden our understanding of sustainability (Akhtar et al., 2018; Del Giudice et al., 2017; Girschik et al., 2022). Similarly, in light of the recent trend toward sustainability-related micro-research, Jones et al. (2019) have concluded that "[t]he present moment is an exciting one for micro CSR scholarship, as researchers can now draw on a meaningful body of work to accelerate future advances and inform new questions of theoretical and practical importance" (p. 293). Accordingly, there have been calls for more micro-level research in sustainability management (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Glavas, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2019; Morgeson et al., 2013) as despite valuable prior advances, the micro-foundations in sustainability research have yet to be fully developed and there is much to learn (Carmeli et al., 2017; Glavas & Radic, 2019).

1.3.1 Promising Avenues in Micro-Level Research on Sustainability Management

In seeking for promising avenues in sustainability management research, scholars have identified future directions that research on the micro-level may take. The next sections outline some avenues that guided the present dissertation in terms of the multiple perspectives of what, where, how, and who the particular articles can and should focus on.

***What Content* Should Be in Our Focus? Social Elements and Human Well-Being at Center Stage**. First, scholars could seek opportunities to more fully incorporate the social perspective in sustainability management research (Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022) and to facilitate win-win scenarios, addressing not only business value but also employee well-being (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Thus far, on a more general level, social factors have been given less priority than economic or environmental concerns in the sustainability management debate (Barnett et al., 2020; Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022; Hallinger, 2020). While recognizing that the three pillars

of sustainability are closely intertwined, Dordi and Palaschuk (2022) nonetheless deem it necessary for research to consider social grand challenges, such as hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), and inequality (SDG 10), in order to facilitate equitable and inclusive development. Similarly in sustainability management micro-research, Girschik et al. (2022) note that the narrative is often dominated by the strategic economic goal of identifying a business case for sustainable practices. As a result, the impact of sustainable practices on individual well-being of employees has been largely ignored (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). In this light, Glavas (2016) argues that in the quest to show that sustainable practices are good for the organization, management scholarship has often overlooked the actual human individual. Accordingly, turning the gaze towards under-researched social challenges, such as health, hunger, and inequality (Dordi & Palaschuk, 2022), and investigating how individuals thrive and suffer in the context of sustainability management efforts (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019) holds considerable potential. The corresponding focus on conditions that foster a flourishing environment for individuals should provide a promising research avenue by strengthening a positive organizational scholarship perspective in sustainability management research (Hoffman & Georg, 2013).

***Where* Can We Broaden Our Understanding and Explore Different *Contexts*? A Glance Across the Border**. Second, scholars have suggested diversifying the settings under examination in individual-level sustainability research by considering more understudied contexts, i.e. developing economies, to challenge accepted understandings (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019). Underlining this gap, Glavas' (2016) review of literature on the individual level of analysis revealed a paucity of articles from outside North America and Western Europe. In a similar vein, Jamali and Karam (2018) reviewed articles on sustainability management issues in developing countries and reported that only 9% focused on the individual level. In general, caution is advised when applying assumptions about mechanisms and concepts from well-researched, i.e. developed economies, to understudied contexts, i.e. developing economies (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019). Accordingly, examining how workers understand and respond to sustainable initiatives under different labor laws and workplace infrastructures, for instance, represents an interesting opportunity (Jamali & Karam 2018; Jamali et al., 2017). Dordi and Palaschuk (2022) point to a potential connection between the bias toward research in western economies and the dearth on social grand challenges in the sustainability management literature, in that the Global South may experience grand social challenges to a different degree. In this light, Girschik et al. (2022) have called micro-sustainability research scholars to pay attention to a richer diversity of voices, particularly those that can provide insights into the lived

experiences of the people most adversely affected. Against this backdrop, a glance across the border might shed light on the thus far under-explored grand social challenges and illuminate mechanisms to promote well-being of individuals across different contexts.

***How* Should We *Design* Future Micro-Level Research? Exploiting the Methodical Toolbox.** Third, scholars have proposed advancing empirical research and expanding the methodological toolkit in micro-level sustainability studies. For instance, Glavas (2016) identified a need for empirical rigor for more complex conceptual models in sustainability micro-research, including mediation and moderation of proposed variables. Further, Jones et al. (2019) commented on the domination of cross-sectional survey studies in the field and the lack of multiple-wave databases, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, qualitative methods, and data stemming from multiple sources. Yet, such approaches have the potential to add to the micro-level literature and help to shed light on complex or fine-grained research questions in sustainability management (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Gond & Moser, 2021). For instance, longitudinal studies can provide insights into temporal dynamics (Ployhart & Ward, 2011), while experimental designs offer the capacity to investigate cause-and-effect relationships (Shadish et al., 2002), features that cross-sectional survey studies have often been criticized for lacking (Mann, 2003; Taris & Kompier, 2003). In a similar vein, qualitative data provides an opportunity to derive a more nuanced understanding through an in-depth exploration of thoughts and behaviors that govern responses (Patton, 2015). Combining qualitative and quantitative data in mixed-methods studies, or including multiple sources, such as perceptual and company data, can further facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena, utilizing the strengths of different data types (Creswell, 2009; Hageman, 2008). With regard to the advantages associated with the various approaches, Jones et al. (2019) encouraged scholars to broaden the range of methodological options and employ practices in micro-level sustainability research that have not been fully exploited.

***Who* Should We Investigate in Terms of *levels*? Leveling Up.** Finally, while micro-research itself is called for (Glavas, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2019; Morgeson et al., 2013) and has the potential to counterbalance the inclination towards macro-level investigations (Cooper et al., 2017), scholars caution against further widening the micro-macro gap (Aguinis et al., 2011; Glavas & Radic, 2019). Accordingly, calls for more rich micro-foundational research with multi-level perspectives are growing (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Jones et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2015). Multi-level analyses that include individual-level data are still comparatively rare in the sustainability management literature (Gond & Moser, 2021; Jones et al., 2017). There have been some exceptions, for instance by Mueller et al. (2012), investigating

the moderating effect of macro cultural value dimensions on the relationship between employees' perceptions of their corporation's social responsibility (CSR) and their affective organizational commitment. Another multi-level study by Shen and Benson (2016) examined the mechanisms through which organizational-level socially responsible human resource management affects individual task performance and extra-role helping behavior of employees. Nevertheless, most research is targeted at one instead of multiple levels (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Kim et al., 2017). In stark contrast, the field itself has been characterized as holistic and multi-level in its nature, involving human beings, organizations and society (Cooper et al., 2017; Glavas & Radic, 2019; Starik & Kanashiro, 2013). The involvement of different stakeholders and confrontations with issues that transcend businesses, borders, and societal institutions is one significant characteristic that renders sustainable development a wicked problem (Pryshlakivsky & Searcy, 2013; Sachs et al., 2010). Against this backdrop, scholars have suggested approaching sustainable management questions with multi-level approaches, focusing on bottom-up principles (Brem & Puente-Díaz, 2020; Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016). Consequently, it seems timely and suitable to paint a more systemic, dynamic and holistic picture via rich micro-approaches that incorporate organizational and macro-societal impacts (Cooper et al., 2017; Frederick, 2016).

1.4 Aims and Structure of the Dissertation Thesis

Through a socio-psychological lens and with an emphasis on individuals, the present dissertation builds on the micro-research movement in management studies and draws on the evolving body of micro-level literature in sustainability management science. By incorporating multiple perspectives sparked by promising scholarly avenues, the dissertation aims to shed new light on questions across sustainability management. More specifically, the articles apply a wide range of methodological approaches (*how*), ranging from a field experiment including perceptual and company data to a mixed-methods design combining in-depth qualitative data and quantitative multiple-wave survey data to a vignette experiment. In a similar manner, a number of analytical approaches have been adopted, including structural equation modeling, qualitative content-analysis, propensity score matching, confirmatory factor analysis, longitudinal measurement invariance testing, as well as multi-level modeling. In addition to advancing the *how* in micro-research on sustainability by employing a broad methodological toolbox, the articles throw light on social and human factors (*what*), broaden the horizon to include the Global South (*where*), and consider multiple levels (*who*). In applying various perspectives and reviewing a diverse set of nuances at and across the micro-level, the

dissertation seeks to contribute to a greater understanding of the complexities of sustainability phenomena. Collectively, the four papers illuminate a broad scope of sustainability management, embracing a variety of stakeholders (e.g., consumers or blue- and white-collar employees), contexts (e.g., geographically the West or the Global South), sectors (e.g., textiles, agriculture or health care) and topics (e.g., food innovations, resilience, sustainable (e-)HRM, or health technologies and ethics). The articles are interdisciplinary in nature and combine a management perspective with psychological approaches in a fruitful way to generate valuable and multifaceted insights. The next section provides an overview of the four papers which comprise the dissertation and demonstrates the rich diversity used to advance micro sustainability management literature.

1.4.1 The Bright Side of Digitalization: A Field Experiment on the Effects of E-HRM on Employee Turnover and Internal CSR

Article 1 employs the idea that technologies can play a significant role in transitioning to sustainable development. It is motivated by the question how sustainable development goals, such as decent work (SDG 8) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10), can be promoted via the distribution and implementation of digitalization in companies in the context of the Global South. While in the current debate much attention has been directed to the technological and economic elements of digitization thus far (Amit & Han, 2017; Bouncken et al., 2021; Črešnar et al., 2023), relatively few empirical studies have been devoted to the socially responsible and ethical considerations of digital technologies. Against this backdrop, Article 1 investigates the benefits of digitalization from both a business perspective, in terms of employee turnover, and an ethics point of view, in terms of employees' perceptions of internal corporate social responsibility. To this end, a field experiment was conducted in a Chinese textile factory over a six-month period, combining company and perceptual data. 613 blue-collar employees were randomly allocated to two groups, with only one of them being introduced to a new e-HRM tool, i.e. a smartphone app. Employee turnover data of 510 participants and perceptual data of 193 participants were analyzed and the results were corroborated using the propensity score matching approach.

The findings of Article 1 demonstrate the potential of e-HRM to simultaneously promote business and ethical objectives, thereby enriching the debate with a micro-focus on employees' well-being and responding to scholars' calls to investigate the effects of digitalization from an ethical perspective (Flyverbom et al., 2019; Hunkenschroer & Luetge, 2022). Further, in distinguishing between signaling and use effect of e-HRM practices, Article 1 enriches

organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and underlines the importance of using e-HRM tools to unfold their potentials.

1.4.2 The Omnivore's Paradox and Consumer Acceptance of Cultured Meat: An Experimental Investigation into the Role of Perceived Organizational Competence and Excitement

Article 2 further elaborates on the potential of new technologies to promote sustainable development by applying a micro-level perspective. The paper addresses intragenerational justice with regard to global food security (SDG 2) in another sector, the agricultural industry, by shedding light on new, ecological sustainability opportunities via technological innovations. To this end, the technology of cultured meat, i.e. meat produced in vitro using animal stem cells, serves as an exemplary disruptive innovation. Given that realizing the sustainability potential of a disruptive technology depends on its successful entry into the mass market (Post et al., 2020), the study investigates consumer acceptance of cultured meat as a critical micro-level factor. Drawing on the *omnivore's paradox* (Fischler, 1980; Rozin, 1976), which refers to a person's simultaneous desire for and reticence towards new foods, the study examines the importance of two hitherto unaddressed variables, perceived organizational competence and the feeling of excitement, on the willingness to buy cultured meat. Further, the study connects these producers' characteristics with two types of prospective producers, i.e. startups and multinational companies, and tests whether different forms of collaboration, i.e. cooperation vs. acquisition with integration, have an impact on consumer willingness to buy cultured meat. A survey-based experiment in Germany with a mixed design of dynamic vignettes in two stages was employed to investigate the proposed relationships.

The empirical results of the experiment conducted on 714 participants suggest that perceived competence and excitement matter for the willingness to buy cultured meat, enriching the understanding of consumer acceptance of cultured meat by complementing the current focus on product- and person-related factors (Palmieri et al., 2020; Siegrist et al., 2018; Verbeke et al., 2015) with insights into producers' characteristics. Additionally, the results show that multinational companies are perceived as more competent, advancing the literature stream on organizational stereotypes, and that startups are more often associated with excitement, contributing to the debate on the liability of newness and smallness. Finally, a small effect indicates that for a start-up a cooperation is more advantageous than an acquisition, adding to the relatively scarce literature on consumer reactions to mergers and acquisitions. Overall, the study provides an understanding of the micro-foundational pathways of consumer acceptance

of new foods and helps to identify levers for companies and managers to more fully develop the sustainability potentials of new technologies in the food sector.

1.4.3 The Role of Ethics in Technology Acceptance: Analysing Resistance to New Health Technologies on the Example of a Governmental COVID-19 Contact-Tracing App

Article 3 is similarly motivated by the potential contribution of new technologies to enhancing sustainable pathways. Against this backdrop, it addresses how new health technologies can promote crisis management and, in the long term, global health and well-being (SDG 3). As argued in Article 2, consumer acceptance plays an important role in tapping the potential of new innovations and health technologies (Lanseng & Andreassen, 2007; Nadal et al., 2020). To this end, Article 3 presents a micro-level focus on user acceptance of new health technologies. Contact-tracing via app serves as a concrete example for a new health technology in the study, which is addressed in a global health crisis context, more specifically the COVID-19 crisis. While the introduction of innovations, particularly in complex industries like the healthcare sector, can involve many uncertainties (Dew & Sarasvathy, 2007; Fisher et al., 2012), ethics arguably constitute a powerful mechanism to reduce uncertainties. Hence, in addition to classical acceptance predictors, such as privacy attitudes, perceived health threat, and technology readiness, Article 3 investigates the influence of ethical variables, i.e. perceived responsibility of the government and ethical optimism, on resistance to a government-issued COVID-19 contact-tracing app. The relationships were analyzed via structural equation modeling across online survey data of 1145 German participants.

The results underscore the impact of the classical acceptance predictors on contact-tracing app acceptance, thus providing further evidence regarding their impact on the adoption of new health technologies (Li et al., 2021; Megnin-Viggars et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022). In addition, the study demonstrates that ethical optimism and governmental responsibility affect the level of resistance to the tracing app and further finds a significant interaction between the two ethical variables. Accordingly, the paper extends the scarce literature on ethical variables as antecedents of technology acceptance (Gauttier, 2019; Milchram et al., 2018; Olarte-Pascual et al., 2021). By highlighting the powerful role of ethical levers in new health technology acceptance in a micro-level investigation, the study contributes to a better understanding of the importance of an ethical perspective in managing sustainable development through technology.

1.4.4 The How and Why of Organizational Resilience: A Mixed-Methods Study on Facilitators and Consequences of Organizational Resilience Throughout a Crisis

Article 4 widens the focus to the need for resilient systems for sustainable development and how to attain them. In light of the prevailing grand challenges, the concept of organizational resilience has gained considerable attention over the past years (Hillmann & Guenther 2021; Mithani, 2020) and similarly forms the core of Article 4. Specifically, Article 4 examines the organizational resilience of Pakistani textile factories over the course of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, gaining insights into potentials for sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12) throughout times of crisis. The article is devoted to answering calls to investigate organizational resilience as a dynamic construct (Conz & Magnani, 2020; Raetze et al., 2021) and to approach the complex concept of resilience with more suitable research designs (Duchek, 2020; Raetze et al., 2022). Using a mixed-methods multi-study approach, insights are gained about facilitators and consequences of organizational resilience throughout a crisis. Qualitative interviews first openly address the perspectives of 17 Pakistani decision-makers in the factories and thus focus directly on the approach of the actors in the Global South. A longitudinal survey series among 146 Pakistani middle- to upper-level managers then serves to validate the initial findings more broadly and to enrich them with knowledge of specific consequences, such as emotional exhaustion and business success. Data of seven survey waves across a time span of three months were analyzed via multi-level modelling. In so doing, Article 4 not only applies a micro-level investigation, but additionally enriches the sustainable management literature with a multi-level perspective.

Qualitative results indicate a broad set of organizational resilience facilitators, differentiated across content-related and temporal properties. Quantitative findings suggest the pivotal role of "soft" facilitators, related to learning orientation and employee focused practices. In terms of consequences, these quantitative results further emphasize the value of organizational resilience for business success and the emotional well-being of employees. Overall, the study advances the relatively limited body of empirical studies on organizational resilience over the course of a crisis by identifying organizational resilience facilitators and their temporal properties as well as finding support for two previously sparsely explored consequences of organizational resilience. These insights can help to guide businesses in fostering resilience and the well-being of their employees (SDG 3, global health and well-being) during times of crises and thereby identify levers for more sustainable development in the Global South.

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