

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The formation of a sustainable organizational identity: Insights from Brazilian coffee producers

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Abstract

Organizations craft their identities to define their character and effectively communicate their values to stakeholders. In the contemporary quest for sustainability, building an identity that genuinely reflects their awareness and attention to these issues is increasingly salient. Over the years, research on organizational identity exhibited constant growth, witnessing the power of organizational identities exerted over organizational behavior. Prior research has emphasized the importance of organizational identity for an array of positive organizational outcomes. Still, much less is known about the levers behind the identity formation process. Against this backdrop, the present study explores the pathways to the formation of a sustainable organizational identity. By drawing on organizational identity and sensemaking literature, we build up a narrative inquiry, analyzing the experiences and perspectives of executives from 25 Brazilian coffee producers through in-depth interviews. The findings underline that the process of formation involves three phases, namely, orienting toward sustainability, acting sustainably, and forging a sustainable identity, which are also shaped by contextual factors. We emphasize the key role of leadership in building a sustainable identity, as their motivations and sustainability-oriented commitments could serve as catalysts for triggering organizational change.

KEYWORDS

coffee producers, emerging markets, narrative inquiry, organizational identity, sensemaking, SMEs, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

A recent survey by Deloitte shows that 75% of organizations have increased their investment in sustainability, reflecting the recognition of climate change and the need to take action to address the challenges that it presents (Deloitte, 2023). This approach is already showing some payoffs, reducing emissions by up to 40% and improving financial performance by up to 15% (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Such benefits highlight the practical advantages of embedding sustainability into core business strategies. Additionally, in

a recent McKinsey survey (McKinsey & Company, 2023), more than 60% of respondents said they would be willing to pay more for a product with sustainable packaging, underlying the salience of sustainable issues for consumers overall.

In view of the impact of sustainability on operational performance and consumer preferences, recent literature suggests that the adoption of sustainable practices has triggered changes in organizational identities (Brockhaus et al., 2017; Principato et al., 2023). In this perspective, over recent years the issue of identity in and of organizations has been gaining momentum in theory and practice due to the

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cross-level dynamics that can evolve in response to different stimuli (Ashforth et al., 2008, 2011; Brown, 2015). Transformative processes unfold as organizations strategically weave economic prosperity, social well-being, and environmental responsibility into their core operations, thereby shaping a sustainable organizational identity (Keränen et al., 2023; Simões & Sebastiani, 2017). As a result, a new identity differentiates the organization from its competitors by creating a favorable reputation (Highhouse et al., 2009) and promoting broader social and environmental objectives (Tzanidis et al., 2024).

Given that the formation of identity can be hindered by cognitive rigidity, it involves the transformation of the cognitive frameworks and beliefs that embody what the members perceive to be the central, distinctive, and enduring aspects of their organization (Fiol, 2002; Gioia et al., 2010; Snihur & Clarysse, 2022). The process of integrating sustainability into an organization's practices begins with the founders' understanding and motivation for their organization's new vision (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Such a sense-making process leads to the creation of stakeholder involvement in shaping social constructs that embrace change. Through the implementation of sustainability-oriented actions, the members of the organization collectively shape their perceptions and understanding of the changes in order to give meaning to their behavior (Chen, 2011; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). This, in turn, fosters a collective culture that embeds sustainable principles and practices and contributes to the formation of a sustainable identity within the organization.

Although the importance of crafting a sustainable organizational identity is widely recognized, the focus of research is mostly on the role of sustainable identity within the context of the organization rather than on its formation. For instance, studies put their locus of attention on its impact on environmental performance (Frostenson et al., 2022; Haldorai et al., 2023) or green innovation performance (Chang & Chen, 2013; Soewarno et al., 2019; Song & Yu, 2018). While underscoring the prominence of the theme, these studies also corroborate the need to further explore the process by which organizations develop sustainable identities. Accordingly, we propose the following research question:

What are the organizational pathways to the formation of a sustainable organizational identity?

To address this question, we bridge the literature on organizational identity (Albert et al., 2000; Gioia et al., 2000; Haslam et al., 2017) with the academic debate on sustainability (Kieffer et al., 2020; Verwaal et al., 2022), unveiling how the embedding of sustainability-related practices into operations leads to the formation of a sustainable organizational identity. By employing the framework of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), we explore how organizational leaders interpret and communicate the meaning of sustainability to other members, thereby facilitating a collective understanding of sustainability. In doing so, we follow the prescriptions of narrative inquiry (Balzano & Vianelli, 2022; Bloom et al., 2020; Makkonen et al., 2012; Pentland, 1999), which

allows the exploration of qualitative insights to identify changes within processes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

In highlighting the pathways for creating a sustainable organizational identity, this study offers multiple contributions. Borrowing elements from organizational identity and sensemaking literature, we explore the process of forging a new organizational identity, thereby enriching our understanding of the determinants of a sustainable organizational identity. By embedding sustainability mechanisms, organizational leaders shape their strategies and operational practices to ultimately cultivate a sustainable organizational identity. We examine how this process unfolds within the context of SMEs, broadening the inquiry to examine the strategies, benefits, and challenges (Cantele & Zardini, 2020; Walker & Preuss, 2008) that these organizations face in pursuing sustainability.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | The intersection of sustainability and organizational identity

The sustainability debate occupies a central position for society and organizations striving to create benefits both for the business and society by aligning economic, social, and environmental objectives (Lopes de Sousa Jabbour et al., 2017; Luo & Zheng, 2013; Sancha et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2007). Previous research has shown that embracing sustainability can bring several benefits to organizations, including reducing costs through more efficient use of resources (Eslami et al., 2023), fostering innovation (Du et al., 2022), and gaining a competitive advantage (Bagur-Femenias et al., 2013). Environmentally, sustainable practices contribute to mitigating environmental risks (Khan, Gupta, et al., 2023; Nguyen, Tu, et al., 2023). Through adopting sustainability initiatives, the organization cultivates a sustainable image (Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Lai et al., 2009), which contributes to the company's overall reputation and builds stronger relationships with stakeholders (Bhatia & Jakhar, 2021; Branco & Rodrigues, 2008; Chen, 2010; Hur et al., 2013).

The integration of sustainability is strengthened by factors such as growing public awareness and societal pressure (Guerci et al., 2016; Popp et al., 2011; Wu & Amoasi, 2024), legislation (Popp et al., 2011; Tchorzewska et al., 2022), innovation capability (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2017; Shu et al., 2016), technologies (Cepa, 2021), and stakeholders collaboration (Kevin van Langen et al., 2021). Several researchers (e.g., Audretsch et al., 2023; Khan, Yu, & Farooq, 2023) observe that managers with a high environmental focus led to better overall sustainability performance in their organizations. However, Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) found that managers are typically primarily focused on the economic dimension of sustainability, with environmental and social issues being addressed under external constraints. Such behavior is driven by self-interest and profit-seeking motives, which are more likely to be associated with an entrepreneurial orientation rather than a sustainable intent (Parrish, 2010).

Despite the seemingly contradictory nature of both orientations, an entrepreneurial orientation can serve as a means of understanding the decision-making process that surrounds sustainability-oriented decisions (DiVito & Bohnsack, 2017). As a result of the hybrid business mission, the identity of the founders shifts toward a sustainable one (Cesinger et al., 2022), prioritizing sustainability practices throughout the organization. This change affects the reputation of the organization, which is closely linked to its past behavior and actions (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997), and shapes a new organizational identity toward sustainability (Highhouse et al., 2009).

2.2 | An organizational identity perspective on the development of a sustainable identity

Conceptualizations of identity within organizational studies have tended to emphasize its central, distinctive, and enduring nature (Albert et al., 2000; Gioia et al., 2000; Sasaki et al., 2020) in relation to how members perceive their organization. Following Albert et al. (2000), identity is seen as a “root construct” that specifies who or what the entity is, who other entities are, and the relationship between them. Due to the existence of different levels of analysis, such as individual, group, organization, or industry, the nature of identity is complex (Ashforth et al., 2011), resulting in the introduction of different perspectives for its elucidation. Using organization as a level of analysis, the identity concept grounded in social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam et al., 2017), sees it as a social construct that arises from collective sensemaking processes to give meaning to shared experiences and answer the core question of ‘who we are as an organization’. As such, it becomes a tool for determining organizational behavior. From the institutional perspective, Zhao et al. (2017), identity represents a social actor, where it includes external claims to legitimacy and behavioral commitments that determine the particular characteristics of an organization. Thus, the identity reflects an organization’s purpose, values, and goals, which enables the specification of organizational statements such as ‘why we exist’, ‘what we believe’, and ‘what we aim to achieve’ (Sikavica et al., 2020).

Although originating from different theoretical frames, both views remain relevant and mutually contribute to the formation of organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2010), emphasizing the link between identity and the cognitive mechanisms of organizational members (Foreman & Whetten, 2002) which can be both individuals within the organization and external stakeholders (Brickson, 2005; Scott & Lane, 2000). In turn, through identity reflexivity, organizational identity has an impact on decision-making processes within the organization (Greco et al., 2021). Thus, the formation of identity is a dynamic process in which changes in existing cognitive schemes and beliefs of organizational members cause changes in organizational identity (Fiol, 2002). According to Gioia et al. (2010), founders and leaders are individuals who express the core values and mission of the organization and, as a result, enable the forging of an organizational identity. Particularly during transitional periods, when an organization is changing its identity, the role of leaders is crucial, as they have the ability to

capitalize on the inherent tensions of the process, by reducing the current value of the existing identity and facilitating members to disengage from it (Fiol, 2002). Therefore, the process of creating a new organizational identity begins with individual identification. Redefining the organization itself comes from changing the way its members perceive it (Chen, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2021). This process involves sensemaking and sensegiving activities that foster a sense of identity within the organization (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Sensemaking is a process of social construction that is triggered when individuals encounter unexpected cues that disrupt their current activities and try to frame experienced situations by assigning them meaning (Weick, 1988, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). It transforms information into knowledge, allowing individuals to classify, sort, and simplify into coherent patterns (Day, 2002). This process includes developing plausible meanings to rationalize and understand an individual’s behavior. In doing so, emotional evaluation and political processes are embedded to justify decisions and seek social acceptance (Jørgensen et al., 2012). Thus, sensemaking arises from individual perceptions and is further influenced by interacting with the perceptions of others inside and outside the organization (Ericson, 2001; Weick et al., 2005); Kjærgaard et al. (2011) observed that the engagement with external actors can help members to develop an understanding of meanings by reducing the cognitive dissonance which can appear at the beginning and aligning their understandings with the public portrayals of the organization.

As a whole, sensemaking unfolds through specific processes: creation, interpretation, and enactment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005). Initially, individuals generate and contextualize cues from the disrupted situation and interpret them according to pre-existing understandings and frameworks. Interpretation is the development of these clues into a more complete and narratively organized sense of the situation. The enactment stage involves acting on these interpretations and observing consequences, which may trigger further iterations of the three processes. This cycle continues until the disrupted activity is satisfactorily restored and meaning and action are aligned (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

While sensemaking refers to cognitive stages of understanding, sensegiving is seen as a process of influencing sensemaking and meaning construction towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). These two processes, which are sequential and reciprocal in nature, are closely related. In the context of changes, organizational leaders, through their hierarchical position, are able to own sensemaking and give meaning to other members shaping and orienting interpretations towards new realities. (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Logemann et al., 2019). For this reason, sensegiving is particularly important when an organization is undergoing change, as it helps to align the collective understanding with the strategic goals (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) whereas sensemaking is relevant in both daily scenarios and uncertain or ambiguous events that trigger organizational change initiatives (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Sensemaking and sensegiving lenses have been widely adopted as a research framework for the study of organizational adaptation and transformation, including the integration of social initiatives (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maon et al., 2009; Sonenshein, 2009). In the context of sustainability, sensemaking facilitates the embedding of new practices in organizations as employees interpret and integrate sustainability initiatives into their existing cognitive frameworks (Podgorodnichenko et al., 2021). Considering that the sustainable identity of an organization is a social actor (Chen, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2021), its formation is a dynamic process influenced by the values and beliefs of the organization's founders and organizational members (Gioia et al., 2010). As new meanings emerge and confusion arises, organizational members need to address issues of organizational identity to reduce this confusion (Bien & Sassen, 2020). Guided by leaders who frame sustainability in ways that resonate with the organizational culture, they collectively reshape their identities to align with sustainable values through a continuous cycle of creating, interpreting, and enacting sustainability-related cues (Gioia et al., 2010; Jansson et al., 2017). In this way, by prioritizing sustainability-related actions, the organization's members shape their perception of the organization as being sustainable and give meaning to these initiatives (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). As a result, sustainability practices are integrated into the organizational framework, fostering a sustainable reputation and creating a sustainable organizational identity.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | The methodological approach

In exploring the process of forming a sustainable organizational identity, we follow the prescriptions of narrative inquiry (Balzano & Vianelli, 2022; Bloom et al., 2020; Gephart, 2004; Makkonen et al., 2012). In our context, this could suggest that an organizational identity is shaped by the ongoing process of constructing a narrative intertwining the reconstructed past, present, and imagined future. According to Vaara et al. (2016), narratives are defined as temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving processes. The power of narratives derives from their ability to engage the audience on an emotional level, which is achieved in part through the evocation of social identities (Maggs & Chabay, 2023). As suggested by Castelló et al. (2023) the narratives reflect the trajectory of an individual identity, also contributing to its formation by sustaining constantly revised biographical discourses that link past events, present experiences, and future expectations. Identity construction is, therefore, self-narrative, as it is based on the development of an individual's narrative repertoire (Castelló et al., 2023; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The narrative lens becomes central as individuals navigate the complexities of change or transition within an organization (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Therefore, by focusing on identifying the key elements of the identity narratives of integrating sustainability-related

actions into organizational performance, we were able to uncover the dynamic process of sustainable identity formation. In this, the study follows the guidelines suggested by Riessman (2008), which include phases such as attending, narrating, transcribing, analyzing, and reading.

The observation phase focused on engaging with individuals and their contexts. This included a review of recent research on sustainability, the evolution of sustainability in the agri-food sector in Brazil, and informal interviews with local farmers adopting sustainable practices. We then proceeded to collect detailed data on the participants and their sustainable-related activities. In doing so, we adopted the interview method as it allowed us to draw out nuanced perspectives from the individuals who were involved in the research (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005).

As narratives are contextually dependent (Bloom et al., 2020), we conducted interviews in the workplace of the interviewees. We also refined the research methods by conducting and transcribing three preliminary semi-structured interviews prior to commencing the interviews. This step helped ensure methodological rigor. As our aim was to understand the process of sustainable identity formation, we used a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to find individuals who met the research criteria. Specifically, individuals representing coffee farms that are actively implementing sustainable approaches in their operations.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to trace the journey of the organization from establishment to current and future initiatives. The interview protocol was developed by applying existing literature and further reflection on the research objectives and theoretical framework. The first part of the interview aimed to explore sustainability drivers and coping mechanisms. We first discussed respondents' perspectives on the overall sustainability situation in Brazil, focusing on the coffee industry. Next, we explored what motivates them to prioritize sustainability, looking at engaging external actors, the challenges faced, and the strategies used to overcome barriers to adopting new approaches. The next section of the questions centered on the issues of sustainability. The environmental aspect focuses on how the organization integrates environmental considerations into its decision-making processes. The aim was to trace the evolution of the organization's identity back to its inception, detailing past, present, and future initiatives. The social section included questions designed to find out about the organization's attitude to promoting social diversity, interaction, and safety in the workplace, as well as the efforts made to communicate these values both internally and externally. A set of questions related to the economic aspects of sustainability explored strategies for long-term profitability, cost-effectiveness of sustainable practices, and investment in sustainable technologies. The summary part of the interview focused on the interviewee's view on the general state of sustainability in the Brazilian market and specific channels through which the organization communicates achieving and maintaining a sustainable identity to external stakeholders.

As suggested by prior studies (Balzano & Vianelli, 2022; Bloom et al., 2020), the specificity of narrative inquiry allows questions to be

adapted to individual interviews. This adaptability allowed for a deeper exploration of each participant's experiences and perspectives. For example, tailored questions such as "Can you describe a specific moment when you decided to introduce sustainability into your organization?" or "What personal beliefs drive your commitment to sustainable practices?" allowed us to uncover individual narratives that shed light on the early stages of the process of forming a sustainable organizational identity. The interviews, which ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes, were recorded with the consent of the participants.

Collection of the data took place between 2022 and the first half of 2023. Once the data had been collected, we moved on to the transcription and analysis stages. In line with the principles of narrative analysis, which emphasizes a movement from the general to the particular (Bloom et al., 2020), we began by reviewing each transcript, accompanied by listening to the corresponding audio recording, while making memos and notes. We then revisited the transcript and began open coding. To ensure reliable analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), this process was carried out independently by two researchers. After achieving good intercoder agreement between the researchers, we proceeded to second-order coding, grouping codes into logical categories reflecting the emergent themes. This step helped to visualize patterns in order to propose the final model that describes the process of sustainable identity formation. Finally, in the reading phase, there was an external peer review of the evidence to ensure readability and understanding of our key findings.

3.2 | Sample and settings

The primary data consists of 25 semi-structured narrative interviews conducted with managing directors and founders of purposefully selected case firms. Purposive sampling, in this case, is relevant as all units of the analysis share the same characteristics in terms of environmental conditions and regulatory requirements (Sohns et al., 2023). The selection of the organization's case was based on several criteria. Firstly, the company's commitment to sustainable practices. Given that the study focused on sustainability, particular emphasis was placed on the food sector, and specifically on those producing coffee. Despite its global economic and social importance as one of the largest agricultural commodities (Bager & Lambin, 2020), the sector has been a pioneer in sustainable production (Levy et al., 2016) and faces sustainability challenges such as water pollution, biodiversity loss, agrochemical use, deforestation, and waste generation (Ho et al., 2018).

The focus of this piece of research is on the Brazilian context. We believe this context is particularly suitable for several reasons. First, Brazil holds a dominant position in the global agricultural sector, especially in commodities such as coffee (Hajjar et al., 2019). Brazil ranks highly also in global biodiversity assessments, often topping lists recognizing countries with extensive biodiversity and significant contributions (Stefanelli et al., 2021). Despite that, the country also faces substantial environmental challenges, particularly in the areas of deforestation (Santos et al., 2022), soil degradation, and greenhouse

gas emissions (Bieluczyk et al., 2024; de Silva et al., 2024; Godar et al., 2012). These environmental concerns highlight the urgency of exploring how sustainability practices can mitigate these impacts while promoting economic growth. Moreover, Brazil's economy is characterized by numerous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) contributing to the country's overall production. (Hajjar et al., 2019; Oura et al., 2016), which highlights the importance of studying how such entities can promote inclusive economic growth by integrating sustainability. In addition, Brazil's commitment to sustainable development is reflected in its regulatory landscape and government initiatives (Hajjar et al., 2019; Romano et al., 2023), underlining its strategic importance.

The sample of the research consists of 25 coffee producers from Brazil, aged between 20 and 65 years old. Among them, 80% are men and 20% are women. All the participants are actively involved in sustainable practices in terms of economic, social, and environmental aspects. This commitment includes participating in export programs, joining fair trade cooperatives, and integrating sustainable management practices into their organizations. Sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1. To maintain respondent confidentiality, we assigned a random ascending number for each interviewee (I1, I2, etc.), which is beside cited quotes.

4 | FINDINGS

To highlight common patterns and interpretations, we categorized similar stories and extracted recurring themes from these groups. Through our narrative inquiry, we found that the pathway of sustainable organizational identity typically begins with agents triggering the motivation to become sustainable. For example, organizational leaders rely on external cues, such as changing marketing trends, consumer preferences, or regulatory pressures toward sustainability. Their interpretation of signals from the environment leads to the formulation of a coherent narrative that aligns organizational values with sustainability principles. These narratives guide strategic decisions and actions (enacting) that serve to cultivate a collective understanding of and commitment to sustainability among organizational members who give meaning to sustainable initiatives. The transition is often supported by other entities, such as cooperatives, universities, and research centers, which play pivotal roles in providing support and guidance. To provide representative examples of these findings, the following tables (2–5) present illustrative quotes and their corresponding codes from the interviews conducted.

4.1 | The triggering external cues

Our research points out that the initiation of a shift towards sustainability is typically triggered by external cues that mainly emphasize the critical importance and value of sustainability in economic, societal, and environmental terms.

TABLE 1 Profile of respondents.

N	Gender	Age	Employment status	Geographical region of Brazil	Years of industry experience
I1	Male	55	Business owner	Southeast	23
I2	Male	40	Business owner	Northeast	17
I3	Male	65	Business owner	Southeast	30
I4	Male	28	Business owner	Northeast	3
I5	Male	65	Business owner	Northeast	35
I6	Female	32	Business owner	Southeast	8
I7	Male	33	Business owner	Southeast	11
I8	Male	37	Business owner	Southeast	11
I9	Male	45	Business owner	Southeast	21
I10	Male	25	Business owner	Southeast	3
I11	Male	20	Business owner	Northeast	1
I12	Male	60	Business owner	Southeast	24
I13	Female	55	Business owner	Southeast	15
I14	Male	45	Business owner	Northeast	12
I15	Male	38	Business owner	Southeast	7
I16	Female	30	Business owner	Northeast	9
I17	Male	22	Business owner	Southeast	1
I18	Female	40	Business owner	Northeast	10
I19	Male	35	Business owner	Southeast	12
I20	Male	25	Business owner	Southeast	4
I21	Female	27	Business owner	Southeast	2
I22	Male	45	Business owner	Southeast	12
I23	Male	22	Business owner	Northeast	1
I24	Male	40	Business owner	Southeast	9
I25	Male	26	Business owner	Southeast	4

Our findings highlight that among the most prominent of these external cues is the growing market demand for sustainable products. As observed by respondent I10, “We realized that there was a demand for better coffees, which are traceable and produced in a way that respects nature. Everyone wants to know where the food that we eat comes from. So, in the coffee industry, it is the same. The buyers then start to demand that”. This growing demand is not only incentivizing businesses to adopt sustainable practices. It also reflects changing consumer preferences toward environmentally and socially responsible products. A further external cue that arises from this growing demand is the financial reward, as sustainable products are able to command a higher price. For instance, respondent I14 mentioned, “... Certified coffee is very well-paid”. Similarly, another respondent, I4, stated, “... He [the representative of a public organization that provides technical support and courses for Brazilian farmers] said that he could buy my coffee for a higher price since I started to farm in another way. In the sustainable way”.

Market trends also cover the technological aspect, which requires companies to adapt to new technologies aiming to advance sustainability. These include the integration of innovations such as renewable energy systems or waste management techniques. For instance,

respondent I2 mentioned, “We are always aware of the trends in the market; we like the innovations. For instance, for now, we are trying to get into the carbon footprint market. And we are always trying to implement new things. Recently, we made some improvements, for instance, solar panels, which provide us with 100% of the energy needed”.

In addition, our findings have shown that government regulations and incentives play a crucial role as external cues. As was said by respondent I24, “I think the sustainability situation in Brazil is very good. There are a lot of government laws and certifications, so I think things are moving in a positive direction”. In particular, respondent I3 highlighted initiatives with a focus on the social aspect of sustainability, “Nowadays, the government itself demands that. Especially the Ministry of Labor, which requires the employer to register their employees. Minimum wage and safety at work by offering PPE and watching if they are using that”. In addition, respondent I23 highlighted the incentives provided by the state government to encourage the adoption of environmentally friendly production methods. He mentioned, “There is a state contest of coffee quality that gives extra points for farmers that practice sustainability.”

Such cues as market demands, technological advancements, and regulatory frameworks, are seen as triggering signals to entrepreneurs to bracket their biases, note the changes, and approach the situation. In doing that, the next stage is interpreting the meaning of the received cues.

4.2 | Entrepreneurial interpretations

Indeed, once the external cues are received, our findings highlight that the formation of a sustainable organizational identity depends on the entrepreneurial decision to adopt sustainable practices. In the majority of cases, our findings highlight that entrepreneurs' choice of sustainability is often due to its expected financial benefits. Many respondents cited the ability to charge premium prices for sustainable products as a driving factor in their decision. For instance, the following quote reflects a common trend among entrepreneurs where the economic benefits associated with sustainability are driving their choices toward more sustainable practices: "It [sustainable approach] is better because we can get a better price for our coffee in comparison with the coffee on the regular market. So, I decided to take this path thinking that I could have a better economic situation" (I9). Another incentive for change is the growing demand for sustainably grown products. As evidenced by respondent I10, "We realized that there was a demand for better coffees, which are traceable and produced in a way that respects nature. Everyone wants to know where the food that we eat comes from. So, with coffee, it is the same. The buyers then started to demand that. And we start to adapt to offer this type of coffee". Not only is this growing demand incentivizing businesses to adopt sustainable practices, but it also reflects changing consumer preferences toward environmentally and socially responsible products.

Another group of incentives centered around entrepreneurs' commitment to preserve nature for both future generations and to ensure the continued survival of the business. This sense of responsibility for the protection of the environment mainly is driven by a personal desire "to take care of nature, the soil, to permit us (next generation) to continue this activity" (I11). Another reason for the shift to a sustainable approach is the recognition that adopting sustainable practices is not just about immediate gain, but also about the long-term resilience and continuity of their businesses. As noted by respondent I20, "... He (the father of the respondent) always said that we should take care of the land in this (sustainable) way to avoid erosion because when he was young, he had some soil losses because of that. And from this, we also know how important it is to preserve nature and water sources".

Furthermore, the entrepreneurs pointed out that the adoption of a sustainable approach provides them with personal satisfaction and recognition. One of the respondents mentioned: "It gives me pleasure to tell people that I am sustainable. To produce a different coffee, with a higher quality. A different product. It's interesting. And we can see the results and then we feel motivated" (I1). This personal satisfaction stems from the alignment of personal values with business

decisions and the knowledge that business makes a positive impact. Apart from satisfaction, some respondents emphasized the importance of being recognized within their industry or community for their commitment to sustainability: "... I feel proud of doing something well. It's a pleasure. ... But it's good to see people recognize that we are doing well. It's also good when another farmer comes and says that our coffee plantation is good" (I15).

Table 2 shows representative quotes and their corresponding codes, which reveal the motivations of the entrepreneurs behind such choices.

Our analysis has highlighted the role of external actors in facilitating the transition to sustainable approaches by supporting and enabling business owners to integrate sustainability into their business operations. Their involvement covers several critical areas. First, it covers technical guidance in terms of sustainability-related practices, including certifications and farm management. It consists of providing training programs: "The EMATER...supported us to become certified by a certification called Certifica Minas. So, they supported us in this process by providing training" (I6), any informational support "They try to teach us about alternative practices also" (I4); or recommendations: "They have a program that is very good for farmers and give me recommendations. So now it is much more organized" (I9). These activities support business owners in the management of certification processes and the assurance of compliance with sustainability standards.

Besides that, external actors assist entrepreneurs with administrative tasks and with documentation related to compliance with regulations. As respondents indicated, "They helped us with documentation, registration of our water source and reserve" (I4) and "They prepared us for certification, audition, technical support" (I18). This support allows entrepreneurs to focus on the effective implementation of sustainable practices by reducing the administrative burden.

In addition, some of the external actors help to connect the entrepreneurs with potential buyers and visitors, thus extending their market reach. They offer entrepreneurs a means of showcasing sustainable products, making contacts, and entering markets that value sustainable products and, as a consequence, become more sustainable. The direct impact of this support is evident in quotes such as "When buyers from another country come and see our business, so we can get something else... The export company in general, bring buyers and visitors" (I2) and "The cooperative supports farmers to develop more and more sustainability. They have some internal processes also if you want to be certified and so on" (I21).

4.3 | Enactment of sustainable actions

Our analysis showed that implementing a sustainable approach involves three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. Tables 3–5 detail each of these dimensions, providing a comprehensive view of the various facets within each. The representative quotes and respective codes introduced in Table 3 are related to the economic aspect associated with sustainable practices. This

TABLE 2 Entrepreneurial motivations to integrate sustainability.

Market demand	<p>“The demand. At first, the only concern was about the quantity of coffee... buyers then started to demand that. And we start to adapt to offer this type of coffee” [I10]</p> <p>“My father didn't care too much about it. And when I started, I didn't care either. But today, the market demands that” [I15]</p>
Economic benefits	<p>“What attracted me? I think it was the premium that we could get by selling the coffee through the cooperative” [I7]</p> <p>“At that time, it was the price. The opportunity to sell coffee for a better price. But to sell the coffee for a higher price, we had to adapt a lot of things on the farm and in the cooperative. So, after that, we realized that there were more benefits besides the price” [I12]</p> <p>“In the beginning, the premium paid per bag. Definitely the price. After that, we realized that when we produce following this system, we can't do it differently, because following that, we know that we are doing our part as producers” [I13]</p> <p>“First of all, it was the financial part. Being sustainable, I can make more money. It is for sure what attracted me the most. Certified coffee is very well paid” [I14]</p>
Environmental Conservation	<p>“... in the past, we had too much deforestation, there was no preserve of water source etc. So based on that, we've had so many problems related to climate change. So, from that, I try to do it better. The farm must help nature. Otherwise, we are going to face more and more problems related to the climate” [I3]</p> <p>“I did it to preserve nature as well. That also encouraged me” [I5]</p> <p>“... also, to improve the conditions of our soil. That was also another reason” [I17]</p> <p>“... Because we had some erosion episodes on the coffee plantation. We used to apply fertilizer, coffee husks, and organic matter on the soil on the top of the hill and in a few weeks, we used to see all this expensive and important input on the bottom of the land. So, I use these events to convince my father to change things” [I23]</p>
Caring about future generations	<p>“For the next generation, isn't it? My sons. And their sons. I think that it's a learning process” [I10]</p> <p>“Well, for me, I think that the main benefit is to be sure that my sons and grandsons will have an opportunity to continue as farmers if they want. Because we are not degrading the land” [I18]</p> <p>“So, since my father took charge of the business, he started to change it. His main concern is to create a good land for the next generation” [I21]</p>
Personal satisfaction	<p>“It gives me pleasure to say that I am sustainable. To produce a different coffee with a higher quality. A different product. It's interesting. And we can see the results, and then we feel motivated” [I1]</p> <p>“We work with coffee because we are passionate about it. It's so nice to be working here with my family. We used to say that the land for coffee is a child that you have to take care of every single day. Then, I feel that the passion that I put into it brings positive feelings to our business” [I22]</p>
Personal recognition	<p>“... I feel proud of doing something well. It is a pleasure. And also, for society in general. We are not farming just to show our work to others, to make advertisements and so on. But it's good to see people recognize that we are doing well. It's good also when another farmer comes and says that our coffee plantation is good” [I15]</p> <p>“I always dreamed of having my land. But I wanted it to be very well organized from the beginning. It's a pleasure to have the recognition of those who visit my farm; it's satisfying. When I go around to see other farms, I can see that they are not as well organized as mine” [I3]</p>
Personal mindset	<p>“Thank God I am an open-minded person. But my father, for instance, says even nowadays that it's not important. For him, it's silly. But it isn't, I'm sure. I can say that I do everything to preserve and care about nature, water sources and so on. We do it without any financial support. And I'm not benefiting only myself or my farmer, but the community” [I15]</p> <p>“... it started with my father. He was very open to new technologies and innovations. But he's the kind of person that likes to see things to believe them. To test things out. He passed away very young. So, my brother and I took charge of the business. And we are young, 26 and 29 years old. So, for us it's not hard” [I16]</p> <p>“We had this dream, of taking care of all the process until delivery of the product to the end consumers. We should do it in a different way, a product with a differential. But above all, not to affect nature...” [I17]</p> <p>“So, in the past it was my father in charge of the farm. Then I grew up and went to university. There, I had the opportunity to learn about these sustainable practices. Then I started to incorporate this new knowledge” [I25]</p>

dimension of sustainability is of great concern to entrepreneurs, particularly due to the potential impacts of climate change. Climatic events such as drought, frost, or heavy rainfall can affect agricultural production, leading to economic instability and uncertainty for farmers. Entrepreneurs' concerns are reflected in statements such as “I worry about the economic side. I'm not excited about the future. We depend a lot on the climate and the price” (I5); or “I don't know

how much coffee I will produce. I have an idea. But if something bad happens, like frost, we will lose our production. Like this year I had a loss of 30% this year. So, we can't make a good balance” (I7); or “I'm more afraid of climate change. I don't worry too much about the price because sometimes it's better to have a lower price with good productivity than having a higher price but with low production because of climate events” (I15).

TABLE 3 The economic dimension of sustainability.

Price Volatility	<p>“But when it comes to the sales part of the business, it's hard because we do not set the price. It's not in our hands. We have to worry a lot about the costs. We are exposed to so many risks, such as climate events. There is no 100% certainty that the price of the coffee will be enough” [I3]</p> <p>“In February we had a very good price. Then this war started and the price decrease a lot” [I7]</p>
Cost Management	<p>“My main concern is about how much I spend to produce the coffee. The price of the inputs increased a lot in the last year. So, we try to keep our invoices in order so we can focus our attention on the budget that we have to invest. Since we do that, we can keep producing coffee and making a profit” [I8]</p> <p>“I don't care about it too much. As you know, the price of coffee changes every day. Every week. So, I try to think about today. [I] Try to keep my costs under my revenue so I can continue as a coffee farmer” [I13]</p> <p>“To know my production costs. In this case, I know how much I spent to produce, and then I know how much I can sell my coffee for to make a profit. It helps in a certain way” [I25]</p>
Labor Challenges	<p>“Also, I think that the legislation for registered workers will mainly affect the bigger farmers. I am in favor of the law. But the way that they treat certain things is too harsh. A lot of demands” [I14]</p> <p>“Besides climate change, I would say labor. We have a plan to mechanize some areas, but it's hard to find workers. I can't say that it's expensive because the price of everything has increased in the last 2 years, and we must put ourselves in their shoes. But it's been complicated to manage our business. Mainly during the harvest season, it was hard to find workers” [I17]</p>
Technological Adaptation	<p>“But also, I think that the use of technology will be fundamental. We try to keep our fields in flat areas so we can use more machines and fewer people, and then we can have a better condition in terms of profit. And if the price increases, of course, we also can have better conditions” [I10]</p> <p>“It's expensive to change the older plantation to the new system. To renew areas, we spend a lot of machine working hours; we need to make a plan. It's not easy. It's expensive, but for me, in the long term, it pays off” [I23]</p>
Governmental Support	<p>“And also, we need to have stability in politics. It seems like the politicians don't care. However, agribusiness increased a lot in the past years. We can't complain. But I think that we should have more support. For instance, we take about four years to grow a coffee plantation, so how can we abandon it? It takes a long time to make money. It's not like other businesses” [I7]</p> <p>“Nowadays, my main concern is politics. ... I am afraid that the left party could win the election. They support the MST (a group of people in Brazil, recognized as land invaders, who call themselves defenders of agrarian reform), they increase bureaucracy, and do not support agriculture” [I16]</p> <p>“... And also, the government can harm us depending on the laws that they pass. We need to have their support. For instance, they release crop forecasts, but they are always publishing numbers that do not make sense. So, it causes damage to the market. And they could support us with more stability in the prices. So, we could have more certainty that if we produce enough we will make a profit. Because sometimes it causes uncertainty for us” [I22]</p>
Certification	<p>“We think about the premium that we can receive by selling our coffee as sustainable or certified. ... Certification is good and can aggregate price. But for me, it's more important for us to know that we are doing a good job” [I20]</p>

When it comes to setting prices, external factors such as climate change or geopolitical situations influence the market prices within the industry. As mentioned by one of the respondents, “the variation of price is something that's hard to deal with” (I21). This, in turn, affects cost management, making it difficult to manage input prices, and labor and equipment costs.

Respondents, therefore, identified potential ways to mitigate economic concerns. For example, entrepreneurs expressed a desire for investment in technology to mechanize operations, increase productivity, and optimize resource use. As respondent I10 highlighted, “I think that the use of the technology will be fundamental. We try to keep our fields in flat areas so we can use more machines and fewer people, and then we can have better conditions in terms of profit. And if the price increases, of course, we can also have better conditions”. In addition, they are looking for support from the government to ensure stable prices and to support agricultural initiatives. Another solution is offered by certification programs, which help to increase financial gains through premium prices and recognition in the marketplace.

According to the conducted interviews and corresponding codes shown in Table 4, the social dimension of sustainability is reflected in fair labor practices, prioritizing the well-being of workers, ensuring safety, promoting inclusiveness, and fostering collaborative, community-centered approaches.

In the case of small firms, mutual support of each other is an example of sustainability through mutual support. This cooperation extends to fair and informal working arrangements, providing services and receiving payment, and fosters a sense of community and trust. As a result, this approach not only fosters a cooperative environment but also contributes to the well-being of employees by ensuring fair compensation and working conditions. For instance, one of the respondents described his approach as follows: “I always used to say to them that it is a business that they will feel the benefits just as I will. Everyone will gain in the end. I pay them more than the minimum salary. And I want to pay even more in the future. As you can see, their house is very good. ... We have to offer good conditions so the workers will stay for a longer time and do a better job. I care a lot about it. My workers are happy here”

TABLE 4 The social dimension of sustainability.

Community Collaboration	“I am a small farmer. I have 50,000 plants only. I live in a neighborhood that is a community of small producers. We help each other. I have the machinery to help them, and they work for me sometimes; we pay a good price for the service provided. It's not a registered relationship, but it's a very fair relationship. We don't exploit each other. It's very natural” [I1]
Workers' Well-being	<p>“We have a lot of workers, and all of them are registered. Nowadays, we even provide housing for some of them. We give them all the support they need” [I2]</p> <p>“We care a lot about them (workers). First, they are registered according to the legislation in Brazil; they regularly have doctor's appointments, we provide work uniforms, they have a lunchtime, transportation, we also help their family during the year when it's possible” [I6]</p>
Safety Training	<p>“... in terms of safety at work, we have the concern about the use of the machines and PPE, training for the workers, for instance” [I6]</p> <p>“Here it's only my family. But about safety at work, the PPE is available to everyone. But sometimes some of us don't want to use it. But we ask them to use it. If we hire someone, the first thing is to give them instructions” [I7]</p> <p>“Well, I have a nephew who works with me. I try to give him instructions about how I like to farm. I try to protect him and to use PPE when we are working with chemicals. When I'm in the tractor with him, I always advise him about the most dangerous areas and the care that he needs to take” [I9]</p>
Equipment and Technology Support	<p>“So, my father takes it seriously. We have all kinds of tools, devices and equipment to protect ourselves. Even for my mom, who is smaller than us, we have one that fits her well because she helps out sometimes. When we are spraying, we wear all the clothes that are required, and then afterwards they remain in a different room. Also, the empty packaging is returned. After work, we wash everything and keep it well organized” [I20]</p> <p>“They (workers) ask us to provide the tools and equipment necessary for their safety and well-being in activities. So, they help us in this case because they tell us what things they need” [I10]</p> <p>“There's one thing that we learned from all of it. For instance, when you arrived, I was processing the coffee. The machine makes a lot of noise. I was wearing earplugs. That is a simple thing but, in the beginning, we didn't care about it. Another example is when I am spraying chemicals, I use PPE and in the past, I didn't use to do that. When I am using the machine to cut the weeds, I use a leg protector. So, all of these things are important” [I12]</p>
Raising Education and Awareness	<p>“Well, we have the SENAR (public institution) that provides training. But they invite the workers, and they don't want to take the courses. They are not interested that much. Farmers want to learn because we are the owners. But workers don't care too much about learning new processes” [I7]</p> <p>“For instance, I was in training recently and the professor taught me how to turn on the machine. I thought I already knew it. But there was a safe way to do that. And I learned it there.” [I12]</p> <p>“At the start of the farm, I didn't use PPE and used the chemicals with no care at all. Now, with the cooperative support and training we started using PPE, to use the correct chemical with the right quantity” [I13]</p> <p>“About safety at work, we provide them (workers) with all the equipment required. We provide them with training sessions offered by the SENAR (public initiative), to keep them updated” [I25]</p>
Gender and Diversity Inclusivity	<p>“... With regards to that, we make sure that it is clear that everyone has the right to express themselves. Discrimination is not allowed” [I24]</p> <p>“Nowadays, from the harvest to packaging, we have women in charge of it, of course, avoiding the heavy work. But it was a concern that we had because we are aware of the challenges that women in rural areas face. Besides, we employ a person with physical disabilities. She helps us with the selection of the beans, physical classification and so on. This person is not registered yet because we do not have this financial condition yet, but she is always there with us” [I17]</p>

(I3). Despite that, some respondents mentioned the existing issue with the registration as “we are small farmers, so it's hard to register workers” (I18).

Given the specific nature of the industry, safety is one of the priorities. Most farmers emphasize the importance of safety measures and proper equipment: “We have a consultancy firm that, in addition to certification, also provides some services for safety at work” (I2) or “Safety equipment is available for everyone... It's important to use it” (I5).

A further example of a socially sustainable practice is the efforts made to educate and raise awareness among farm employees. Although there may be challenges in getting workers to fully engage

in training program as “farmers want to learn because we are the owners. But the workers don't care too much about learning new processes” (I7), farmers remain committed to educating workers about safety measures and their importance and emphasize continuous learning and improvement in safety practices. Also, there is a clear commitment to gender and diversity inclusion, with some farmers actively recruiting women and people with disabilities in order to provide equal opportunities and promote diversity within their workforce.

As shown by the representative quotes and respective codes in Table 5, the environmental dimension of sustainability, as highlighted by various farmers' insights and actions, stands out for its central role

TABLE 5 The environmental dimension of sustainability.

Chemical Reduction	<p>“To decrease the use of chemicals. Not only in coffee. In all crops. First of all, we decrease the use of herbicides a lot. Then, we use the brush cutter much more instead of using glyphosate” [I4]</p> <p>“One important thing is the chemicals. So, it was something that changed because I had to stop using certain types of chemicals” [I14]</p> <p>“To change from chemicals to biological inputs. Because biological products take more time to produce results. So, it was the main challenge” [I22]</p> <p>“The hardest part was changing the chemicals. For instance, Endosulfan is an amazing product for dealing with pests. We can't use it anymore. So nowadays we try to use less toxic and more efficient chemicals, including the use of biological products” [I24]</p>
Waste Management	<p>“I think it was the management. Not leaving empty packaging around the farm. Not leaving chemical packaging in the field. Building the chemical room to store it. Now, we don't have to go back to the field to find the inputs. We already know that it is in the chemical room” [I10]</p> <p>“I must stop burning the trash. I started to put the trash in the right place. There was a landfill nearby, so we took it there. Now we don't have it anymore though” [I13]</p>
Forest and Water Source Preservation	<p>“We have been doing reforestation for 15 years. We care about the ecosystem that provides the fauna ecological corridors between the forest areas and the water sources such as lakes and rivers. One of the things that was fundamental to our business was the water source. You can see that a lot of farmers are facing problems because of the lack of water. My father started to recover and protect it so many years ago. And we do not face this kind of issue” [I2]</p> <p>“Here on the farm, the water comes from a source of water. ... He (my father) set fire to the area around the water source, and the water dried up. So, he realized that he was wrong. Then I told him to let the trees grow up again around there and now the water's back again” [I12]</p>
Crop Management and Biodiversity Promotion	<p>“I try to do crop rotations, for instance. I was learning about sustainability from other farmers. ... people have to try to do a better management in the rows between the lines of coffee, especially in the winter [I3]</p> <p>“For instance, when we made the terracing, we decreased the population of plants on our farm. We changed the variety because most of the farmers use the same varieties, and we planted a different one” [I17]</p> <p>“We want to change the current system to one with cover crops. But since our land is a hill, it's hard to do. Because we do everything by hand, it's not easy” [I20]</p>
Soil preservation	<p>“As I told you, we are investing in soil nutrition and conservation, so we see it as a benefit. We follow the recommendation from the soil analysis. In the past, we didn't use to. We used to apply fertilizer and lime randomly. Now, we follow the soil analysis, applying only what is required” [I25]</p> <p>“For me the most important thing is protecting the soil because it's fundamental for farming. And thinking about the use of different commercial crops, it means more revenue at different times than the coffee harvest” [I21]</p>

in conserving natural resources, mitigating the impact of climate change, and ensuring the long-term resilience of farms.

Most respondents are actively reducing chemical dependency and have improved waste management practices in place to reduce environmental impact. The following quotes demonstrate this: “We reduce the use of chemicals a lot, so it becomes an easier job, just with this adjustment. Glyphosate, for instance,” [I4]; or “... we avoid the use of herbicide as much as we can, the pesticide we use only when it is necessary. So, a conscious use of the chemical inputs in general” [I11].

Another key issue is the farmers' commitment to forest conservation and the protection of water sources. With a focus on maintaining soil health, most respondents promote biodiversity and crop management. For instance, respondent I25 stated: “There is also a thing that we call ‘dry box’ on the ground. It is like a hole in the ground, a very deep one, to store rainwater. It contributes to improving the infiltration of water into the soil and avoiding erosion”.

Without farmers adapting to and learning about sustainable farming practices, these changes in environmental practices would not be possible. Through continuous training, access to up-to-date knowledge, as mentioned by respondent 17, “Since you get information you try to verify if it is true, ask another farmer and test it,” and following innovative technological solutions as noted by interviewee I2 “... we are always aware of the trends in the market, we like innovations. For instance, for now, we are trying to get into the carbon footprint market”, farmers are able to evolve and adapt their decisions to a sustainable approach.

Furthermore, the narratives are indicative of the significant changes and challenges farmers face in the adoption of sustainable practices. It highlights the multifaceted nature of their transformation, involving structural adjustments, environmental awareness, and redefined farm organization like “to build a room to store the chemicals, the inputs, the fertilizers” (I9) or “to separate each part of the land for a specific thing, not mixing, for instance, the pigsty (place to grow pigs) with the place to store the feed for the animals” (I15).

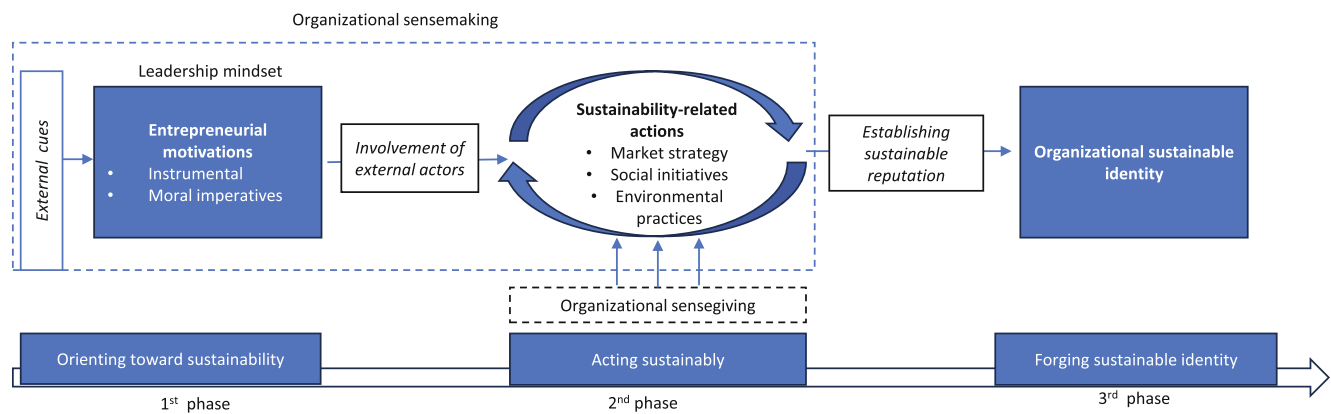


FIGURE 1 Process model of organizational sustainable identity formation.

5 | DISCUSSION

The process of organizational identity formation is dynamic and multifaceted, influenced by a range of contextual factors (Ashforth et al., 2011; Brown, 2015). In the context of transforming identity, the primary role in strategic changes belongs to an organization's founders or leaders (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). By conceptualizing identity as narrative (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), we explored how the founders' commitment to sustainability and their efforts to integrate sustainability into organizational practices led to the creation of new sustainable organizational identities.

In Figure 1, we present a narrative process model of the creation of a sustainable organizational identity. The model proposes that the nature of the pathway is influenced by the individual's experience and perception of their commitment to sustainability.

Building a sustainable identity in organizations stems from the motivations driving entrepreneurs. The incentives for pursuing sustainability are attributed to external cues, such as market demand for sustainable products, technological advancements, and government regulations. Entrepreneurs are motivated by the interpretation of these cues, which guide their decisions and actions towards sustainable practices. The strength and salience of motives are influenced by individual predispositions and contextual features and include both stable attributes and recent events (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). The conducted interviews revealed several critical themes shaping these motivations. Particularly prevalent among these motives are economic benefits, also defined in the literature as instrumental motives (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001), associated with increased market demand and profitability. Carson (1993)'s prior research linked such motives to the shareholder theory, placing economic benefits and the maximization of shareholder value at the forefront. But while economic incentives are important, they don't fully describe all the complexities of creating a sustainable organizational identity. Our analysis has shed light on another type of motivation centering on moral imperatives – the pursuit of 'doing the right thing'. This altruistic approach finds resonance in stewardship theory (Bacq & Eddleston, 2018; Davis et al., 1997), which emphasizes the

importance of individuals feeling responsible not only for their immediate actions but also for long-term environmental and social impacts. From this perspective, individuals see themselves as stewards, responsible for the well-being of future generations by preserving and caring for the environment today. Such behavior is influenced by intrinsic factors, which are seen as psychological mechanisms (Davis et al., 1997). The recent work of Čater et al. (2023) has highlighted the dominance of moral motivations over financial incentives. This shift means that adopting sustainable practices tends to prioritize societal concerns over business objectives. Our research has uncovered intrinsic motives rooted in the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs, reflected in their pursuit of personal mindset, satisfaction, and recognition. These motivations, which represent a distinct dimension beyond economic or moral imperatives, contribute significantly to the creation of sustainable practices. The recognition of the need for the integration of a sustainable approach into the organization's operations is seen as the first stage in the process of sustainable identity formation. It emerges as a deliberative process of aligning organizational values and strategic initiatives with sustainability principles.

The interpreting phase reveals the formulation of narratives integrating sustainability principles within organizational values. In doing so, organizations begin to identify key stakeholders who act as facilitators for sustainable adoption in order to extend the influence through interactions down to the individual level (Gioia et al., 2000; Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Our analysis highlights the role of external actors, including cooperatives, universities, and research centers, in helping to implement sustainable practices. They do this by improving employee knowledge, organizing training, facilitating partnerships, and helping to overcome legal and technical barriers.

The last phase of the sensemaking process involves the enacting of sustainable actions that span three critical dimensions: economic, environmental, and social (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Nguyen, Costanzo, & Karatas-Özkan, 2023). Economic initiatives include not only profit-driven strategies but also long-term financial resilience. Social practices include initiatives focused on community benefit, diversity and inclusion, ethical labor practices, and social responsibility. Environmental practices emphasize measures to reduce

environmental impact, promote conservation, adopt green practices, and minimize carbon footprints. Such actions are a reflection of the organization's commitment to environmental stewardship and effectively signal its reputation as an environmentally conscious entity to stakeholders.

By adopting sustainable practices, members within organizations seek not only to effect change but also to interpret the meaning of these actions, thereby giving them meaning (Georgiou & Murillo, 2023; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As Ashforth et al. (2011) argued, from the founder's vision and motivation, a shared sense of purpose has been instilled in employees. As members interpret the meaning of sustainable behavior, they contribute to the formation of a collective understanding of the organization's commitment to sustainability. At this stage, it is critical that individuals within the organization communicate and reinforce the value of sustainability. Sensegiving makes implicit messages about the rationale for sustainability efforts explicit, builds support, and shares collective commitment to sustainable action (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016), while sensemaking enables members to reflect on the impact of their actions, to assess changes toward sustainability goals, and to identify opportunities for improvement. Through these iterative processes, organizations foster a culture of sustainability that aligns every action with the strategic goal of building a sustainable identity.

Furthermore, organizations build stakeholder trust and a positive reputation within their industry and beyond. As this reputation grows, organizations move from recognizing sustainability efforts to embedding sustainability principles into their core values, culture, and operations. This leads to the final stage of the process, where the organizational sustainable identity is formed.

From a theoretical point of view, we propose a model that elucidates the process of forming a sustainable organizational identity (Chang & Chen, 2013; Chen, 2011). While previous research has highlighted the significance of sustainable identity (Chen, 2011; Haldorai et al., 2023), limited attention has been given to the underlying mechanisms and stages involved in its formation. The present study addresses this gap by offering a detailed exploration of the pathways through which the organizational identity is transformed into a sustainable one. Furthermore, in line with prior literature which elucidates the influence of individual identity on collective identity (Ashforth et al., 2011; Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), our study, by employing a sensemaking framework, illustrates how evolving perceptions of organizational leaders precipitate shifts amongst other members within the organization. Our findings align with existing literature (Cristofaro, 2022; Kjærgaard et al., 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) to suggest that sensemaking comprises three distinct phases, namely creation, interpretation, and enactment. Thereby, our research enriches the literature on sensemaking by delineating these three processes, which, as observed by (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), have been frequently conflated in previous studies. Furthermore, we contribute to the stream of research on the narrative approach by conceptualizing identity as a narrative (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Sonenshein, 2010). This approach enriches understanding of how organizations navigate transitions and redefine their

identities in pursuing sustainability. Lastly, our analysis contributes to existing literature on SMEs from emerging markets, providing insight into the processes through which SMEs navigate the complexities of integrating sustainable practices (Cantele & Zardini, 2020; Walker & Preuss, 2008).

This pathway sheds light on the complex processes through which organizations cultivate a commitment to environmental responsibility and thus contributes to a broader understanding of how sustainable values are embedded in organizational identities. Thus, from a managerial perspective, our findings suggest that organizations can signal their commitment to sustainability to stakeholders. This signal is a mechanism by which an organization can enhance its reputation and thus facilitate the acquisition of resources and processes that support the sustainability transition within the organization. Beyond government support (Tandon et al., 2024), sustainability initiatives are an instrument to expand network embeddedness and engage with a wider range of stakeholders (Andersen et al., 2023). Establishing a sustainable reputation can attract more consumers concerned about social and environmental responsibility in their purchasing decisions as the value of an organization committed to sustainability increases (Lourenço et al., 2014). As a result, the integration of sustainable practices can strengthen the position of the organization in the marketplace and increase the opportunities available for superior performance.

As far as the practical implications are concerned, managers can apply actionable insights from our research to integrate sustainability into organizational operations. The first step in building a sustainable organizational identity is to create motivation. Managers should encourage member engagement by aligning sustainability initiatives with financial incentives to maximize shareholder value, for example, by introducing bonus schemes. Equally important is promoting a culture where moral imperatives, such as doing the right thing, carry as much weight as financial success. Raising awareness of the value of sustainability among employees can be achieved through providing specialized training in the context of sustainability involving third parties, such as industry experts, and educational organizations.

Embedding sustainability goals into core values and business strategy is essential to initiate the transition to sustainability. In doing so, developing a marketing strategy that includes actions toward sustainability can help to build trust and enhance the organization's reputation among stakeholders. To strengthen these efforts, organizations can work with governments and partners on sustainable initiatives. Overall, the building of a sustainable identity is the result of the consistent adoption of sustainable practices that are embedded in the organization's culture and operations.

6 | CONCLUSION

By conceptualizing identity as a narrative, we have elucidated the pathway through which organizations cultivate sustainable identities. While previous research on sustainable identity focuses on how it affects performance outcomes, our research goes further by exploring

the complex process of creating a sustainable identity. We identified three key phases in this process: orienting toward sustainability, acting sustainably, and finally forging a sustainable identity. This first stage begins with recognizing the importance of sustainable initiatives in the organization's leadership mindset. The transition to the next stage is facilitated by external actors who guide organizations toward the adoption of these new perspectives. Subsequently, as the organization moves from the orientation phase to the action phase, it begins to implement specific sustainable practices in its operations, which cover three dimensions of sustainability.

The prioritization and integration of sustainable actions into various facets of an organization's operations increase the recognition of an organization's commitment to sustainability by its stakeholders, thus contributing to the establishment of a sustainable reputation. It leads to forging a sustainable identity, the final phase of the process, which represents the culmination of the organization's efforts to be sustainable.

Although the current study provides new insights into developing sustainable organizational identity, it also presents several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Firstly, as the formation of identity is a dynamic process, conducting longitudinal studies can advance the literature by examining how identities change in response to internal and external factors over time. Secondly, the conceptualization of the identity formation process may vary across geographical regions and cultural contexts. Therefore, there is a growing need for more cross-cultural perspectives in order to increase the generalizability of findings (Dangelico & Pontrandolfo, 2015). Furthermore, while we primarily focus on identity at the individual level, it is imperative to acknowledge that identity is a multi-level construct (Ashforth et al., 2011). Thus, future research could address the formation process at the team, organizational, and inter-organizational levels. In terms of methodology, it is important to recognize that the narratives may have changed over time since the interview (Balzano & Vianelli, 2022; Bloom et al., 2020). Thus, future research may benefit from incorporating longitudinal data collection methods to capture the dynamic nature of narratives and better understand how sustainable identities evolve over time. In this way, following (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), we propose to explore the role of different contingencies such as organizational culture, leadership style, and environmental factors in shaping the trajectory of sustainable identity formation over time.

While there is much more to learn, we believe that the study of sustainable identity narratives has provided valuable insights into the organizational dynamics of the identity formation debate.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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