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Rethinking Organizational Sustainability: Resolving the Conceptualization Enigma through an Integrative Framework

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ABSTRACT

Organizational sustainability has emerged as a critical concern for firms navigating increasing regulatory, stakeholder, and environmental pressures. Despite its importance, the concept remains fragmented, with research variably framing sustainability as (i) observable actions and reporting practices, (ii) a strategic capability fostering long-term competitiveness, (iii) a process of addressing stakeholder needs over time, and (iv) an outcome of employee thriving and organizational resilience. This conceptual paper synthesizes these diverse perspectives to provide conceptual clarity and guide operationalization in both research and practice. Using an integrative review of multidisciplinary literature, the study develops a comparative framework that links each perspective to its underlying assumptions, key constructs, and common measurement approaches. Building on this framework, the paper proposes a synthesized view of sustainability as a dynamic, stakeholder-embedded capability that is manifested through concrete organizational practices and reflected in multidimensional outcomes. The study contributes to theory by reducing definitional ambiguity and offering a structured approach for selecting indicators aligned with specific research questions. For practitioners, the findings provide actionable insights for designing and implementing sustainability initiatives that integrate operational effectiveness, stakeholder value creation, and employee well-being. Overall, this work advances a holistic understanding of organizational sustainability, emphasizing its multidimensional and integrative nature.

Introduction

Organizational sustainability refers to how organizations create and preserve economic value while reducing environmental harm and supporting social well-being over time. Since the Brundtland Commission framed 'sustainable development' as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, sustainability has moved from a peripheral concern to a strategic and governance priority for firms (United Nations, 1987). In management research, corporate sustainability has been positioned as related to but distinct from corporate social responsibility, emphasizing the long-term integration of environmental and social issues into core strategy and operations (Bansal & Song, 2017; Amini & Bienstock, 2014).

Despite its prominence, the term remains conceptually plural. Studies alternately operationalize sustainability through reporting and compliance (e.g., ESG disclosure and standards), through strategic capabilities that enable adaptation, through stakeholder value creation, or through employee and organizational outcomes such as thriving and resilience (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; Grewal & Serafeim, 2020; Lozano, 2015). This definitional dispersion makes it difficult to compare findings, select indicators, and design interventions that go beyond the triple bottom line rhetoric to measurable practice (Elkington, 1997).

This paper responds by integrating four recurring conceptualizations of organizational sustainability action, mechanism, need satisfaction, and thriving and by showing how each implies different measurement choices and managerial levers. By clarifying assumptions and proposing a synthesis that links actions to capabilities and outcomes, the paper aims to support more cumulative research and more coherent sustainability strategies (Hahn et al., 2018; Gormezoglu et al., 2024; Miceli et al., 2021).

Rationale

This paper addresses the research gap in literature due to the persistent fragmentation in how organizational sustainability is defined and measured. While sustainability is widely discussed in corporate strategy and reporting, scholarly work often treats it as a broad umbrella covering diverse constructs (e.g., ESG disclosure, corporate social responsibility, resilience, and stakeholder value creation), which limits cumulative theory building and comparability across studies (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; Bansal & Song, 2017).

A clearer conceptualization is also essential for measurement. Sustainability indicators are frequently chosen based on data availability rather than construct fit, resulting in inconsistent operationalization and mixed evidence regarding performance implications (Amini & Bienstock, 2014; Grewal & Serafeim, 2020). By contrasting four recurring perspectives and mapping each to typical metrics, this paper provides guidance for selecting indicators that align with the underlying theoretical claim.

Practically, managers face increasing expectations to demonstrate credible sustainability progress through standards and reporting frameworks (e.g., ISO 14001 environmental management systems; GRI Standards; SASB industry standards). Without conceptual clarity, initiatives risk becoming compliance-driven or symbolic rather than strategically embedded. The synthesis proposed here links observable actions to underlying capabilities and stakeholder outcomes, supporting more coherent decision-making and evaluation of sustainability programmes.

Literature Review

Organizational sustainability research spans strategy, accounting, operations, and organizational behaviour, which has produced diverse definitions and measurement conventions. Responding to calls for conceptual clarification and construct–measure alignment, this review adopts a narrative integrative approach to cluster influential contributions into four complementary lenses: sustainability as action, sustainability as mechanism, sustainability as need satisfaction, and sustainability as thriving (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; Grewal & Serafeim, 2020). Rather than treating these lenses as competing, the paper uses them to make assumptions explicit and to clarify how different research questions imply different operational indicators.

Sustainability in the Organizational Setting

Organizational sustainability refers to an organization's ability to generate long-term economic value while simultaneously preserving environmental systems and promoting social well-being. In contemporary management literature, sustainability is widely understood as the integration of economic, environmental, and social objectives into organizational governance, strategy, and operational decision-making processes (Amini & Bienstock, 2014; Bansal & Song, 2017). This integrative perspective reflects the broader sustainability paradigm rooted in the triple bottom line approach, which emphasizes that organizational success should be evaluated not only by financial performance but also by environmental stewardship and social responsibility (Elkington, 1997; Lozano, 2015). Consequently, sustainable organizations are expected to balance profitability with responsible resource use and equitable stakeholder relationships to ensure long-term organizational viability and societal value creation (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Hahn et al., 2018).

Despite this conceptual consensus, empirical research frequently operationalizes organizational sustainability through limited indicators such as ESG disclosure scores, environmental performance metrics, or single-dimension sustainability indices. While these measures provide useful insights, they often capture only partial aspects of the broader sustainability construct, leading to inconsistencies across studies and ambiguity for practitioners attempting to evaluate sustainability performance (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; Grewal et al., 2020). As a result, scholars increasingly emphasize the need for more comprehensive conceptual frameworks that clarify how sustainability should be understood and measured within organizational contexts.

To address this challenge, the present study organizes the sustainability literature into four complementary conceptual lenses. The action perspective focuses on observable sustainability practices, policies, and reporting initiatives implemented by organizations. The mechanism perspective highlights underlying strategic capabilities that enable firms to maintain sustainability-oriented performance over time. The need-satisfaction perspective emphasizes the extent to which organizations address stakeholder expectations and maintain legitimacy within society. Finally, the thriving perspective focuses on positive organizational outcomes, including employee vitality, learning, and resilience, that emerge from sustainability-oriented practices (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Miceli et al., 2021; Gormezoglu et al., 2024). Collectively, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of organizational sustainability and offer guidance for aligning theoretical constructs with appropriate measurement approaches.

Organizational Sustainability as Action

The action perspective conceptualizes organizational sustainability in terms of the tangible practices and initiatives that organizations implement to mitigate environmental and social impacts

and institutionalize responsible business behavior. From this viewpoint, sustainability is reflected in observable organizational activities such as adopting environmental management systems, establishing targets for emissions and waste reduction, integrating sustainability criteria into procurement and supply chain management, and publishing sustainability or integrated reports (Epstein & Rejc Buhovac, 2014). These actions are often supported by formal management standards and reporting frameworks that guide organizations in implementing and communicating sustainability initiatives. For instance, environmental management systems such as ISO 14001 provide structured guidelines for managing environmental impacts within organizational operations (International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2015). Similarly, global reporting frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) establish standardized disclosure practices that enable organizations to communicate sustainability performance to stakeholders in a transparent and comparable manner (GRI, 2021; SASB, 2018).

One of the key strengths of the action perspective lies in its observability and measurability. Sustainability practices under this lens can be evaluated using audits, disclosure indices, and operational performance indicators such as carbon emissions intensity, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and occupational health and safety statistics. These measurable indicators allow researchers and practitioners to assess whether organizations are implementing sustainability initiatives and complying with environmental and social standards (Grewal et al., 2020).

However, critics argue that focusing exclusively on observable sustainability actions may lead organizations to treat sustainability as a compliance-oriented or symbolic activity rather than a strategic priority. In some cases, firms adopt sustainability programs primarily for legitimacy or reputational benefits without embedding them into core business strategy, a phenomenon often referred to as “greenwashing” or symbolic adoption (Hahn et al., 2018). Consequently, recent research emphasizes the importance of governance structures, leadership commitment, and organizational culture in transforming sustainability initiatives from isolated actions into institutionalized organizational routines that support long-term sustainability performance (Butolen et al., 2025).

Organizational Sustainability as Mechanism

The mechanism perspective conceptualizes organizational sustainability as a strategic capability that enables firms to adapt to environmental and social challenges while maintaining long-term competitiveness. From this viewpoint, sustainability is not merely a set of isolated initiatives but a deeper organizational capacity embedded in strategic decision-making and resource management processes. This perspective draws heavily on the resource-based view (RBV) and dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasize that organizations achieve sustained competitive advantage by developing valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and by continuously reconfiguring these resources in response to changing environmental conditions (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997). Within the sustainability context, these capabilities allow firms to integrate environmental and social considerations into innovation, operations, and strategic planning.

The natural-resource-based view (NRBV) further extends this argument by linking environmental challenges to the development of sustainability-oriented capabilities. According to this perspective, firms can gain competitive advantage by building capabilities related to pollution prevention, product stewardship, and the development of environmentally sustainable technologies (Hart, 1995). These capabilities not only reduce environmental impact but also stimulate innovation and efficiency improvements that contribute to long-term organizational performance (Hart & Dowell, 2011).

Empirical studies adopting this lens often examine how sustainability-oriented capabilities influence organizational outcomes such as innovation, operational efficiency, and stakeholder relationships. For example, research comparing firms with strong sustainability commitments to those with weaker commitments demonstrates that sustainability-oriented organizations tend to develop distinctive governance structures, management processes, and innovation capabilities that contribute to superior long-term performance (Eccles et al., 2014). Similarly, sustainability-driven innovation has been linked to enhanced competitiveness and improved stakeholder trust (Grewal et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the mechanism perspective also recognizes that organizations frequently encounter tensions when balancing economic, environmental, and social objectives. Rather than viewing these tensions as problems that can be permanently resolved, the paradox perspective suggests that organizations must continuously manage and navigate such competing demands. In this regard, sustainability becomes a dynamic organizational process requiring ongoing learning, adaptation, and strategic alignment (Hahn et al., 2018). Consequently, sustainability-oriented capabilities are increasingly viewed as critical mechanisms through which organizations address complex sustainability challenges while maintaining long-term resilience and competitive advantage.

Organizational Sustainability as Need Satisfaction

The need satisfaction perspective conceptualizes organizational sustainability in terms of the extent to which organizations meet the expectations and well-being of their diverse stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, regulators, and investors, both in the present and over the long term. Rooted in stakeholder theory, this perspective emphasizes that organizations must balance the interests of multiple stakeholder groups rather than focusing solely on shareholder value (Freeman, 1984). From this viewpoint, sustainability involves the ongoing management of stakeholder relationships and the creation of shared value that ensures organizational legitimacy and long-term viability (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). By aligning business strategies with stakeholder expectations, organizations can enhance trust, reputation, and social acceptance, which are increasingly recognized as critical components of sustainable business performance (Bansal & Song, 2017).

Research within this lens also highlights that the prioritization of stakeholder interests is influenced by factors such as stakeholder salience, governance structures, and ownership characteristics. For instance, studies show that family-owned firms may demonstrate different sustainability priorities compared with non-family firms due to their long-term orientation and stronger community ties (Neubaum et al., 2012). Similarly, institutional pressures from regulators, investors, and civil society organizations can shape how firms address environmental and social concerns in their strategic decision-making processes (Hahn et al., 2018).

The need satisfaction perspective broadens the measurement of sustainability beyond environmental performance metrics to include stakeholder-centered outcomes. These outcomes may involve fair labor practices, workplace health and safety, diversity and inclusion, ethical supply chains, community development initiatives, and responsible customer engagement. Such indicators reflect the broader social responsibilities of organizations and their role in contributing to societal well-being (Missimer & Lagun Mesquita, 2022). In practice, organizations increasingly rely on comprehensive social sustainability frameworks and public policy benchmarks to evaluate their performance in these areas. For example, broader societal well-being indicators—such as those related to employment quality, social inclusion, and community resilience—are often incorporated into sustainability assessments to capture the wider social impact of organizational activities (McGuinn et al., 2020). Consequently, this perspective highlights that achieving

organizational sustainability requires not only minimizing environmental harm but also actively contributing to the well-being of stakeholders and society.

Organizational Sustainability as Thriving

The thriving perspective extends the concept of organizational sustainability beyond the reduction of negative environmental and social impacts toward the promotion of positive and regenerative outcomes for both organizations and their members. From this viewpoint, sustainability is closely associated with the capacity of organizations to foster environments where individuals and teams experience vitality, continuous learning, and psychological growth. Within the field of organizational behavior, thriving at work is commonly conceptualized as the joint experience of vitality—referring to a sense of energy and aliveness—and learning, which reflects ongoing development and the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the workplace (Spreitzer et al., 2005). These experiences are typically shaped by supportive organizational contexts, including empowering leadership, collaborative cultures, and relational resources that enable employees to engage meaningfully in their work.

Recent research highlights the link between social sustainability and thriving organizational cultures. For example, studies demonstrate that knowledge-sharing environments and supportive workplace practices can foster employee thriving, which in turn strengthens broader social sustainability outcomes such as engagement, innovation, and organizational commitment (Gormezoglu et al., 2024). In this sense, thriving functions as a mediating mechanism through which sustainability-oriented practices translate into improved organizational and social performance.

Furthermore, contemporary conceptual models position thriving alongside organizational agility and digital transformation as critical drivers of resilience in turbulent environments. Organizations that integrate sustainability strategies with adaptive learning capabilities and employee well-being are better equipped to navigate uncertainty and maintain long-term performance (Miceli et al., 2021). By fostering vitality, collaboration, and continuous learning, sustainability initiatives can contribute to organizational resilience and innovative capacity.

An important strength of the thriving perspective is that it connects sustainability initiatives to human-centered outcomes, such as employee well-being, creativity, and knowledge development, which are essential drivers of long-term organizational value creation. Nevertheless, thriving should not be treated as a direct definition of sustainability itself. Rather, it is more appropriately understood as a positive outcome pathway through which sustainability practices generate broader benefits for organizations and society. In this regard, sustainability strategies are most effective when they simultaneously enhance employee well-being and contribute to societal value creation while maintaining organizational competitiveness (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Conceptual Synthesis

Integrating the four conceptual lenses action, mechanism, need satisfaction, and thriving suggests that organizational sustainability should be understood as a multidimensional and dynamic capability embedded within organizational systems and stakeholder relationships. Rather than representing a single set of practices or outcomes, sustainability emerges from the interaction between strategic capabilities, operational practices, stakeholder engagement, and organizational well-being. In this integrative view, organizational sustainability can be conceptualized as a stakeholder-embedded capability that is enacted through observable sustainability practices and reflected in both organizational performance and human-centered outcomes (Amini & Bienstock, 2014; Bansal & Song, 2017).

From this perspective, sustainability-related actions such as environmental management systems, sustainability reporting, and responsible supply-chain policies—represent the visible manifestations of deeper organizational capabilities. These underlying capabilities enable firms to sense environmental and social challenges, mobilize resources, and reconfigure organizational processes in response to evolving sustainability pressures. This argument aligns with dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasizes that organizations maintain competitiveness by continuously sensing opportunities, seizing resources, and reconfiguring capabilities in dynamic environments (Teece et al., 1997). Consequently, sustainability initiatives should not be viewed as isolated programs but as strategic routines embedded in organizational structures and decision-making processes.

At the same time, sustainability capabilities create value by enabling organizations to address the expectations and well-being of diverse stakeholders. Drawing on stakeholder theory, sustainable organizations seek to balance the interests of employees, customers, communities, investors, and regulators while maintaining legitimacy and long-term organizational viability (Freeman, 1984). By aligning sustainability practices with stakeholder needs, organizations can strengthen trust, reputation, and social legitimacy, which are increasingly recognized as critical resources for long-term success.

Furthermore, sustainability practices contribute to positive organizational outcomes by fostering environments that support employee thriving, learning, and resilience. Thriving organizations cultivate workplace conditions that enhance employee vitality and continuous learning, which in turn support innovation and adaptive capacity (Spreitzer et al., 2005). However, the integration of economic, environmental, and social objectives inevitably generates tensions and trade-offs within organizations. A paradox perspective suggests that such tensions should not be viewed as problems to be resolved permanently but rather as ongoing dynamics that must be managed through organizational learning, strategic alignment, and leadership commitment (Hahn et al., 2018).

Overall, this conceptual synthesis highlights that organizational sustainability is best understood as a dynamic and integrative process in which sustainability practices, strategic capabilities, stakeholder relationships, and human outcomes interact to create long-term organizational and societal value.

Table 1: Comparison of four conceptual lenses of organizational sustainability and their measurement implications.

Sustainability Definition	Author Name and Year	Journal	Perspective Lens
"Corporate sustainability is the joint pursuit of environmental, social, and economic goals under conditions of uncertainty, complexity, and risk, aimed at achieving long-term organizational prosperity."	Scholz et al. (2024)	Review of Managerial Science	Action
"Corporate sustainability integrates economic, ecological-environmental, and equity-social concerns into corporate strategies, supply chains, stakeholder communication, and innovation processes."	Amini & Bienstock (2014)	Journal of Cleaner Production	Need Satisfaction

"Corporate sustainability means meeting the needs of a firm's current stakeholders without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders."	Dyllick & Hockerts (2002) (cited in Meuer et al. 2021)	Widely cited across top journals	Thriving
"Corporate sustainability includes thriving economically, using resources efficiently, reducing emissions, adding community value, and respecting stakeholder values."	Scholz et al. (2024)	Review of Managerial Science	Mechanism
"Sustainability is a strategic imperative integrating environmental, social, and governance issues to enhance long-term corporate value."	Rezaee (2017)	Journal of Business Inquiry	Mechanism
"Corporate sustainability means embedding environmental integrity, economic viability, and social equity into all decision-making and business operations."	Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos (2014)	Organization & Environment	Action
"Corporate sustainability links business strategy to environmental protection and social justice through stakeholder engagement and innovation."	Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010)	Journal of Business Ethics	Need Satisfaction
"Organizational sustainability is about maintaining financial performance while minimizing harm to natural and social systems."	Epstein & Buhovac (2010)	Business Strategy and the Environment	Thriving
Corporate sustainability is the joint pursuit of environmental, social, and economic goals under conditions of uncertainty, complexity, and risk, aimed at achieving long-term organizational prosperity (Scholz et al., 2024).	Scholz et al. (2024)	Review of Managerial Science	Action
Corporate sustainability integrates economic, ecological-environmental, and equity-social concerns into corporate strategies, supply chains, stakeholder communication, and innovation processes (Amini & Bienstock, 2014).	Amini & Bienstock (2014)	Journal of Cleaner Production	Need Satisfaction
Corporate sustainability means meeting the needs of a firm's current stakeholders without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002) (cited in Meuer et al. 2021).	Dyllick & Hockerts (2002)	(cited in Meuer et al. 2021), Widely cited across top journals	Thriving
Corporate sustainability includes thriving economically, using resources efficiently, reducing emissions, adding community	Scholz et al. (2024)	Review of Managerial Science	Mechanism

value, and respecting stakeholder values (Scholz et al., 2024).			
Sustainability is a strategic imperative integrating environmental, social, and governance issues to enhance long-term corporate value (Rezaee, 2017).	Rezaee (2017)	Journal of Business Inquiry	Mechanism
Corporate sustainability means embedding environmental integrity, economic viability, and social equity into all decision-making and business operations (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).	Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos (2014)	Organization & Environment	Action
Corporate sustainability links business strategy to environmental protection and social justice through stakeholder engagement and innovation (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010).	Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010)	Journal of Business Ethics	Need Satisfaction
Organizational sustainability is about maintaining financial performance while minimizing harm to natural and social systems (Epstein & Buhovac, 2010).	Epstein & Buhovac (2010)	Business Strategy and the Environment	Thriving

Table 1 highlights that each conceptual lens of organizational sustainability addresses a distinct analytical question. Specifically, the action perspective focuses on what organizations do in terms of sustainability practices and policies; the mechanism perspective explains how organizations develop strategic capabilities that create competitive advantage; the need satisfaction perspective examines whose interests and well-being are addressed through sustainability initiatives; and the thriving perspective considers the positive outcomes that emerge for individuals, organizations, and society. Recognizing these distinctions is important for research design because the selection of measurement indicators should be guided by the underlying theoretical perspective and unit of analysis rather than by the mere availability of secondary data sources (Grewal et al., 2020; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).

For instance, studies examining sustainability reporting practices or regulatory compliance may appropriately rely on indicators such as ESG disclosure scores, certification status (e.g., ISO 14001), or sustainability reporting indices. In contrast, research investigating strategic or capability-based explanations of sustainability should focus on underlying organizational processes and capabilities, including innovation capacity, resource reconfiguration, and sustainability-oriented leadership practices (Teece et al., 1997; Hart & Dowell, 2011). Similarly, investigations addressing social sustainability are more effectively measured through stakeholder-centered outcomes such as employee well-being, community engagement, diversity and inclusion, and responsible supply-chain practices rather than solely through environmental performance indicators (Missimer & Lagun Mesquita, 2022).

To enhance conceptual clarity and empirical rigor, scholars increasingly recommend employing multi-dimensional measurement approaches that integrate indicators across different sustainability lenses. Such mixed indicator frameworks enable researchers to trace relationships between sustainability actions, underlying organizational capabilities, and resulting performance or well-being outcomes. This integrated approach strengthens construct validity and generates more

meaningful managerial insights by linking sustainability initiatives with both strategic processes and stakeholder impacts (Bansal & Song, 2017; Grewal et al., 2020).

Building on this synthesis, organizational sustainability can be pragmatically defined as the continuous organizational capability to align strategy and operations with environmental limits and social foundations, implemented through measurable sustainability practices and reflected in sustained organizational performance and stakeholder well-being. This integrative definition accommodates both compliance-oriented evaluations such as reporting and environmental management systems—and capability-based assessments that emphasize innovation, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement. At the same time, it recognizes that organizations must continually navigate trade-offs and tensions between economic, environmental, and social objectives, which require ongoing strategic management rather than permanent resolution (Hahn et al., 2018).

Research Methodology and Data Extraction

To ensure transparency and methodological rigor, this conceptual study adopted a structured literature search and extraction approach to identify influential definitions, theoretical perspectives, and measurement frameworks related to organizational (or corporate) sustainability. The purpose of this review was not to provide an exhaustive catalogue of all sustainability studies but rather to capture high-impact and conceptually explicit sources that clarify how sustainability is defined and operationalized within organizational contexts. Conceptual and integrative literature reviews are widely used in management research to synthesize fragmented knowledge and develop clearer theoretical frameworks (Snyder, 2019).

The literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, which are commonly used for identifying high-quality peer-reviewed research in business and management studies (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Search queries combined keywords such as *corporate sustainability*, *organizational sustainability*, *definition*, *measurement*, *ESG disclosure*, *social sustainability*, *dynamic capabilities*, and *thriving at work*. Foundational works were included regardless of publication year due to their theoretical significance, while additional sources published primarily within the last 10–15 years were prioritized to reflect recent developments in sustainability governance, reporting frameworks, and stakeholder-oriented management practices (Bansal & Song, 2017; Grewal et al., 2020).

To ensure relevance and conceptual clarity, studies were selected based on three inclusion criteria. First, sources had to be peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or recognized standards-setting publications. Second, the study needed to provide explicit conceptual definitions, frameworks, or operationalizations of sustainability at the organizational level. Third, the selected sources had to contribute to at least one of the four conceptual lenses proposed in this study: sustainability as action, mechanism, need satisfaction, or thriving. Studies that focused exclusively on narrow environmental performance indicators without connecting them to broader organizational sustainability constructs were excluded from the analysis (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).

The screening process was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine their relevance to the research objective. In the second stage, the full texts of the remaining articles were examined in detail to assess conceptual alignment and methodological relevance. For each included source, key information was systematically extracted into a structured spreadsheet template. Extracted variables included the sustainability definition provided, the theoretical perspective or lens adopted, the assumed causal pathway, the unit of analysis, and the indicators or metrics proposed for measuring sustainability. This structured data

extraction facilitated consistent comparison across studies and supported the development of the conceptual classification presented in Table 1.

The synthesis process involved iterative thematic coding, in which the selected studies were grouped according to their dominant conceptual orientation. Through repeated comparison and refinement, the sources were organized into the four-lens framework proposed in this study. Such integrative synthesis approaches are commonly used to consolidate diverse theoretical perspectives and identify underlying patterns within multidisciplinary research domains (Snyder, 2019).

It is important to note that the present review adopts an integrative rather than a fully systematic review approach. Consequently, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the selection of sources may be influenced by publication bias and the availability of indexed literature in major academic databases. Second, the classification of studies into conceptual lenses inevitably involves a degree of interpretive judgment by the researcher. Future research could extend this work by conducting a PRISMA-based systematic literature review or bibliometric analysis, which would allow for more comprehensive coverage of sustainability research and provide additional insights into the evolution of organizational sustainability scholarship.

Discussion

The integrative review of the literature revealed four dominant conceptual lenses through which organizational sustainability is defined and operationalized: action-based, capability-based, stakeholder-oriented, and thriving-oriented perspectives. These lenses collectively illustrate that sustainability in organizations is not a single construct but a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing managerial practices, strategic capabilities, stakeholder outcomes, and human well-being.

First, the action-based perspective conceptualizes sustainability as the implementation of observable organizational practices such as environmental management systems, ESG reporting, and sustainability certifications. Studies within this stream emphasize measurable activities such as sustainability disclosures, carbon management practices, and compliance mechanisms as indicators of sustainable behavior (Amini & Bienstock, 2014; Grewal & Serafeim, 2020). These practices serve as visible manifestations of a firm's commitment to environmental and social responsibility and are frequently used in empirical research due to their accessibility and comparability.

Second, the capability-based perspective highlights sustainability as a strategic capability embedded within organizational processes. Drawing from the dynamic capabilities framework, this perspective emphasizes the organization's ability to sense environmental and social challenges, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources to maintain long-term competitiveness (Teece et al., 1997; Miceli et al., 2021). The findings suggest that organizations that develop adaptive learning mechanisms and resource reconfiguration capabilities are better positioned to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Third, the stakeholder-oriented lens frames sustainability as the capacity of organizations to create value for diverse stakeholder groups. Consistent with stakeholder theory, sustainable organizations balance economic, environmental, and social responsibilities while addressing the expectations of employees, customers, communities, and investors (Freeman, 1984; Hahn et al., 2018). This perspective emphasizes that sustainability outcomes should be evaluated through stakeholder-related metrics such as employee well-being, community impact, and social equity.

Finally, the thriving-oriented perspective extends sustainability toward positive organizational outcomes, particularly employee vitality, learning, and resilience. Research indicates that

supportive organizational cultures, knowledge-sharing practices, and inclusive leadership environments foster thriving at work, which in turn contributes to broader social sustainability outcomes (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Gormezoglu et al., 2024).

Overall, the synthesis demonstrates that sustainable organizations integrate observable practices, strategic capabilities, stakeholder value creation, and human flourishing. The findings highlight that sustainability measurement should move beyond isolated indicators toward integrated frameworks linking actions, capabilities, and outcomes, thereby providing a more comprehensive assessment of long-term organizational sustainability.

Conclusion

This integrative review underscores that organizational sustainability is a multidimensional construct encompassing managerial actions, strategic capabilities, stakeholder outcomes, and employee thriving. The synthesis revealed four dominant conceptual lenses: action-based, capability-based, stakeholder-oriented, and thriving-oriented perspectives. Action-based approaches emphasize observable practices such as ESG reporting and sustainability certifications (Amini & Bienstock, 2014; Grewal & Serafeim, 2020), while capability-based perspectives highlight dynamic capabilities that allow firms to adapt and maintain competitive advantage (Teece et al., 1997; Miceli et al., 2021). Stakeholder-oriented frameworks stress balancing economic, social, and environmental responsibilities to create value for diverse groups (Freeman, 1984; Hahn et al., 2018), and thriving-oriented lenses focus on employee well-being and resilience as drivers of broader organizational sustainability (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Gormezoglu et al., 2024). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that sustainability in organizations cannot be reduced to singular metrics but requires an integrated approach linking practices, capabilities, stakeholder value, and human flourishing. The findings contribute to theory by offering a comprehensive conceptual classification that can guide both empirical measurement and strategic implementation of sustainability initiatives.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the review employed an integrative rather than fully systematic methodology, which may have introduced selection bias due to reliance on indexed literature and the inclusion of high-impact sources only (Snyder, 2019; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Second, the categorization of studies into the four conceptual lenses involved interpretive judgment, potentially affecting objectivity. Third, the review prioritized literature from the last 10–15 years, which may have underrepresented historical contributions or emerging but less-cited research. Finally, the focus on conceptual clarity limited the inclusion of studies narrowly addressing environmental or financial indicators, which may provide complementary insights into organizational sustainability practices (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).

Future Research Directions

Future studies could build on this synthesis by adopting more systematic or bibliometric approaches, such as PRISMA-based reviews or citation network analyses, to capture broader trends and the evolution of organizational sustainability scholarship. Researchers may also empirically test the integrative four-lens framework to examine the interactions between observable practices, strategic capabilities, stakeholder outcomes, and employee thriving across diverse industries and cultural contexts. Additionally, future work could explore the development of holistic sustainability measurement tools that integrate action, capability, stakeholder, and

thriving indicators, enabling organizations to assess long-term performance comprehensively. Investigating causal mechanisms linking these lenses with financial, environmental, and social outcomes would further enhance both theory and managerial practice.

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