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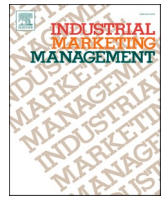
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# Corporate sustainable brand identity work and network embeddedness: Learnings from Better Place (2007–2013)

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## ABSTRACT

The growing attention to the climate crisis in today's business environment, increases the need for B2B firms to integrate corporate sustainable branding activities in stakeholder interactions. Motivated by a continuous push for market reforms to promote a sustainability agenda for B2B firms, this research uses an intensive single case study design to showcase how corporate sustainable brand identity work is carried out in B2B firms and how business network embeddedness affects this work. We describe how Petter Place, a company that attempted to introduce a radically new way of providing charging for electric cars, provides an opportunity to outline and discuss corporate sustainable brand identity work in B2B networks. We identify how corporate sustainable brand identity work is carried out through different sub-processes, such as building corporate sustainable brand identity and awareness, network mobilizing, and ongoing actor commitment and coalignment, and how network embeddedness facilitates and restricts these processes in different ways.

## 1. Introduction

Many B2B companies operate in sectors infamous for their negative environmental impact (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). At the same time, environmental awareness is increasing worldwide and B2B companies need to address these issues. In step with growing attention to the climate crisis and more manufacturers pursuing sustainable development goals, the need for sustainable corporate branding is growing. Following the UN sustainable development goals, sustainability is multifaceted and involves multiple aspects relating to B2B marketing (Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Voola, Ray, & Carlson, 2022). In addition, for B2B firms, there is increased political interest in pushing for market reforms to promote a sustainability agenda. All these developments channel pressure towards adapting to new market realities with changing purchasing norms, regulations, and standards (Johnsen, Miemczyk, & Howard, 2017). In

the present context, we build on the existing research that addresses environmental or green dimensions of sustainable B2B branding<sup>1</sup> (Chan, He, Chan, & Wang, 2012; Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021; Khan, Gupta, Kumar, & Kumar, 2023; Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

A corporate brand identity expresses to stakeholders what is unique about the brand (Kapferer, 2012). Corporate branding consists primarily of corporate identity and corporate associations. Brands in B2B contexts are considered to indicate origin, quality and performance and hence work to communicate the values and benefits of a company's offerings (Österle, Kuhn, & Henseler, 2018; Sarasvuo, Liljander, & Haahtela, 2023). Research on the subject during the last decade, however, shows that corporate branding encompasses a range of elements beyond just corporate identity and corporate associations, including brand purpose (Hollender & Breen, 2010),<sup>2</sup> personality (Davies, Rojas-Méndez, Whelan, Mete, & Loo, 2018; Kovalchuk, Gabrielsson, & Rollins, 2023),<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we focus on environmental/green sustainability. When we refer to "sustainability", we thus mean environmental, or green, sustainability; with "sustainable" we refer to environmentally sustainable.

<sup>2</sup> Hollender & Breen, (2010) emphasize the importance of integrating a sense of purpose into all aspects of a company's operations and aligning branding and marketing efforts with that purpose to build a strong and meaningful connection with consumers.

<sup>3</sup> Davies et al. (2018) suggest that brand personality dimensions, sincerity, competence, and status influence corporate image and branding.

experience (Verhoef, 2020),<sup>4</sup> and storytelling/narrative performance (Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017).<sup>5</sup> These elements work together to create a strong, cohesive corporate brand identity that resonates with customers and other stakeholders. For the scope of this article, we refer to brand identity as the “characteristics or associations that strategists in an organization want to implant in the minds of their internal and external constituencies” (Xie & Boggs, 2006).

According to Stuart (2011, p. 139), a “sustainable corporate brand is defined as a corporate brand whose promise or covenant has sustainability as a core value”. The sustainable corporate brand “needs to emerge from an actual and cultural corporate identity where sustainability is embedded” (Stuart, 2013, p. 795). Mahmoud, Kumar, Fuxman, and Mohr (2023, p. 58) state that “sustainability is about ensuring long-term business growth without depleting natural resources, causing environmental damage, or creating societal problems”. In this paper focusing on environmental, or green, sustainability, we thus see a sustainable corporate brand as a *corporate brand whose promise or covenant has long-term business growth without depleting natural resources or causing environmental damage as a core value*. A sustainable corporate brand signals essential attributes of a company's collective offerings and actions (Lahtinen & Närvänen, 2020). It is concerned with understanding how the identity of a company's actions influences the relationship value expectations of customers (and other stakeholders) (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021).

The endeavors of a firm to create and maintain a sustainable corporate brand on an ongoing basis we refer to as *sustainable corporate brand identity work*. Others have also linked the notion of identity work to branding (Chatzopoulou & Navazhlyava, 2022). In our case, the specific inspiration for the identity work notion stems from Basque and Langley (2018, p. 1687) and their concept of organizational identity work, which “draws attention to what people do to instill or reorient conceptions of identity”. In this stream of literature, identity work concerns activities to construct and sustain a public representation. The concept of identity work also involves the top managers' actions to “mobilize discursive elements in their communications to promote conceptions of identity likely to resonate with audiences” (Basque & Langley, 2018, p. 1688). By sustainable corporate brand identity work we thus refer to *a firm's activities intended to create, present, and sustain the appearance of sustainable corporate brand values and project a sustainable corporate brand identity*.

Based on the reasoning above, sustainable corporate brand identity work has an important role to play in mobilizing partnerships for sustainable development (Gupta & Kumar, 2013). With a growing interest from investors, governmental bodies and other salient stakeholders, corporate brand identity work related to environmental sustainability has become an important issue for B2B companies (Iglesias, Mingione, Ind, & Markovic, 2023; Vesal et al., 2021). This development calls for additional research on sustainable corporate brand identity work in a B2B context. With a few notable exceptions (see e.g. Iglesias et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023), current research on brand identity work in a B2B context focuses on the sustainable corporate branding efforts of B2C firms towards end-users (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Vallaster, Lindgreen, & Maon, 2012) and views transition to sustainable corporate branding from the perspective of a single firm (Hockerts, 2015; Vallaster et al., 2012). In addition, recent reviews show that research on sustainable branding in a B2B context is limited (Khan et al., 2023; Vesal

et al., 2021). The received view disregards the systemic qualities of sustainable corporate brand identity work. In particular, the importance of key dependencies on suppliers, customers, and other actors in B2B networks in contexts where sustainability aspirations evolve, as well as the importance of communicating a joint brand identity, are mostly neglected.

Sustainable corporate brand identity work is different from corporate brand identity work mainly due to the added contextual complexity of brand management. We explore the claim that to understand the challenges of sustainable corporate brand identity work in a B2B context, “corporate brand studies need to acknowledge the importance and interrelated nature of internal actors in connection with their external business partners” (Koporcic & Tornroos, 2019, p. 1686), i.e., the business network. Sustainable corporate brand identity work in networks is not only about campaigning to make others change. To develop a sustainable corporate brand, much of what is required is a consequence of co-alignment with other business actors. Co-alignment refers to the process of aligning the brand's values, purpose, and actions with those of other actors in the business network. This can involve collaborating with suppliers, distributors, and other stakeholders to create shared value and promote sustainability (Iglesias et al., 2023; Kovalchuk et al., 2023). The goal of co-alignment is to create a more sustainable and responsible brand that operates in harmony with other stakeholders in the network. Not taking the co-dependencies of other business network actors into account when working towards launching sustainable brands is likely to cause failure (Günzel-Jensen & Rask, 2021). Hence, rather than thinking of developing brand management concepts specific to sustainable branding, exploring processes of creating and maintaining business network commitment to sustainable corporate brand identity is essential for understanding the specific challenges of sustainable corporate branding.

To research the influences of business networks related to sustainable corporate brand identity work in B2B contexts, we deploy the IMP perspective on business network embeddedness as an analytical lens. Business networks are organized patterns of interaction and interdependence, dealing with organizational as well as economic and technical issues (Håkansson & Snehota, 2000). In this paper, we refer to this interdependence among business actors and their resources and activities as network embeddedness (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998). Studying sustainable corporate brand identity work from a network perspective highlights the challenges arising from influencing actors to adapt resources and activities (Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic, & Koporcic, 2020). Network embeddedness therefore means that the corporate brand identity work relies on the co-adaptation of actors, buyers, and sellers as well as other network actors (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005).

When it comes to sustainability concerns, strong relationships with network partners are instrumental for the strategic choice to engage in sustainable behaviour (De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Voronov, 2018), because they help identify ways to implement sustainable practices and increase support for them (Zafeiropoulou & Koufopoulos, 2013). Previous research suggests that network relationships are important means to overcome prejudices that may exist against the adoption of environmentally sustainable strategies. For example, De Clercq et al. (2018) and Markley and Davis (2007) found that network embeddedness can help a firm counteract negative customer reactions to products that enhance environmental preservation but are more expensive. Similarly, supply chain literature suggests that a firm's sustainable strategic brand position benefits greatly from its development of strong network relationships because these relationships provide legitimacy for the adoption of sustainable behaviours (Vandchalia, Cahoon, & Chena, 2020). The purpose of the paper is to analyze how sustainable corporate brand identity work is carried out in B2B firms and how business network embeddedness affects this work. In this paper, we thus ask the questions: *How is sustainable corporate brand identity work carried out in a B2B context? How does business network embeddedness influence sustainable corporate brand identity work in a B2B context?*

<sup>4</sup> Verhoef et al. (2020) argue that creating a positive brand experience (such as customer touchpoints, consistency of the experience across channels, and the emotional impact of the experience) is a crucial aspect of building customer loyalty and enhancing brand equity.

<sup>5</sup> Combining narrative theory and performativity theory, Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) suggest that brand identity develops as a narrative performance and that a brand is a product that explores and interacts within its brand ecosystem.

We explore the sustainable corporate brand efforts of Better Place, a multi-sided platform provider for charging electrical vehicles and marketing storage capacity. The historical case provides an opportunity to outline and discuss sustainable corporate brand identity work in business networks. Our findings show how sustainable corporate brand identity work is carried out through different sub-processes and how network embeddedness influences both facilitate and restrict these processes in different ways. Our findings also indicate that managers need to take the network into account for their sustainable corporate brand identity work to be successful. Hence, our study answers the call for more network-level research on sustainability (Harrison, Prenekert, Hasche, & Carlborg, 2023). The paper is outlined as follows. We first elaborate on the concept of sustainable corporate brand identity work. Next, the influence of network embeddedness on the process of sustainable corporate brand identity work is discussed and the sub-processes of this process are outlined. Then the methodological approaches used for the data materials are presented. In the next section, the analyses and discussion of the case are presented. Finally, we provide an overall conclusion to the paper, where a summary of the findings is displayed and implications for both research and management are noted.

## 2. Sustainable corporate brand identity work in business networks

The literature on corporate brand management traditionally takes departure in actions of management in single firms and how they may work to positively influence brand equity, and concerns the actions of other firms as a stakeholder management issue (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). Corporate branding helps companies earn respect, legitimacy, and trust, enabling them to better manage their network of multiple stakeholders (Frooman, 1999). Within sustainable contexts characterized by systemic dependence, however, it is not enough just to consider the individual firm's corporate branding activities. According to Hatch and Schultz (2002, p. 1004), "Identity is not an aggregation of perceptions of an organization resting in people's heads, it is...a dynamic set of processes by which an organization's self is continuously socially constructed...by all organizational stakeholders who join in the dance." The balancing of environmental and other concerns remains to this day part of the systemic problem of sustainable brand identity work, meaning that the problem of achieving sustainable development must be seen holistically rather than partially, as interconnections, interactions and interdependencies exist at multiple levels of this phenomenon (Davidz & Nightingale, 2008). The circumstantial, non-linear, and "wicked" nature of sustainable development problems is often discussed (Robinson, 2004; Weaver, Tan, & Crossan, 2021). UN characterizes achieving sustainable development goals as a "systemic puzzle" stressing multiple sector partnerships as critical. This entails business networks as a relevant analytical starting point for exploring how sustainable development actions in B2B companies rely on collaborative efforts.

At the very core of the business network approach is the idea that firms are interdependent and that their actions are affected by, and affect, other firms' actions (cf. Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Trying to instigate change in a network is thus not a solitary task; "a company seeking change is always dependent on the approval and actions of others to achieve the change, when introducing a new service, altering a logistics pattern or developing a new product" (Håkansson & Ford, 2002, p. 135). For the sake of environmentally sustainable activities, it is not enough with the approval of other actors; these actors must change their activities as well. One way to describe the impact of network actors' interconnectedness and interdependence on brand identity work is through the concept of network embeddedness. The concept of network embeddedness builds on the business network approach for analyzing B2B activities (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998). In its most generic sense, business network embeddedness "is merely a synonym of having connected relationships or being part of a larger context" (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017, p. 96). Network embeddedness can be understood as

containing two main characteristics; first, firms are "embedded in networks of interpersonal relationships and larger social structures", and second, "these social relationships form ongoing structures which have their own histories" (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998, p. 189). Thus, network embeddedness is both historically and socially constructed. Furthermore, network embeddedness consists of several dimensions, which can be summarized as technological, spatial, temporal, market, social and political embeddedness (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998).

Sustainable corporate brand identity work in a business network context poses specific problems. Knowledge, concerns, and priorities evolve, and so do the interests, skills, and resources of the involved actors. This impacts their ability and willingness to contribute to solving the issues in the brand identity process they are part of. In business networks, corporate brand identity work involves a transformational process towards increased alignment. Adding to the complexity, being involved in sustainable corporate brand identity work can have negative consequences, as others fail to adapt to these actions or more resources are depleted or destroyed than saved in the network context. This may hurt corporate brand equity as well, as corporate brands are seen or being portrayed as "greenwashed" and risk losing trustworthiness (Vesal et al., 2021). For the firm to succeed in becoming a more environmentally sustainable corporate brand, the network must become more environmentally sustainable. A "truly sustainable approach requires a cradle-to-cradle, closed-loop transformational approach, which will necessitate the involvement of multiple actors to ensure companies operate without damaging the environment or depleting non-renewable resources" (Leek, 2012, p. 257). Therefore, in a business network context, a firm's sustainable corporate brand identity work cannot be managed from within the firm – it will be affected by stakeholders such as customers and suppliers, as well as by political actors.

In the literature on corporate brand identity work, Hatch and Schultz (2008) provide a generic framework for managing a company's brand alignment processes. This framework comprises four phases (or cycles in their terminology) moving from inside to outside the firm, engaging internal and external stakeholders. We commend the authors' focus on brand identity work as being an ongoing process, which calls for continuous engagement of business actors, already embedded in other networks and being dragged in different directions as the business activities of multiple contexts unfold in various directions. Our starting for the brand identity work of a business enterprise differs, as we see the sustainable corporate brand identity work as an interactive and concurrent identity-shaping process. For this reason, we see the following three sub-processes as overlapping; building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness (Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010), network mobilizing (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018), and ongoing actor commitment and coalignment (Iglesias et al., 2020).

### 2.1. Building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness

Brand identity work can be likened to a conversation, where suppliers, buyers and other network actors challenge and build further on the initial brand claim, also leading the initial company to adjust its claims (see also Chatzopoulou & Navazhlyava, 2022). Building brand identity and awareness in B2B contexts concerns influencing the beliefs held by suppliers, buyers, and other stakeholders regarding the central and distinctive values of the focal organization. Actors' beliefs are shaped on an ongoing basis, as they are exposed to information about the focal firm and seek to interpret it and act upon it. Building corporate brand identity concerns the active and intended proliferation and communication of a set of values as actors rhetorically seek to convince other actors by communicating a specific image of themselves (Andersen, 2001). In a B2B context, use situations differ, and meanings of offerings and their associated value proposition are co-created across buyer-seller relationships (Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016). The value perceived from sustainable branding testifies to this, as multiple parameters are involved when buyers and suppliers are evaluating a



sustainability claim, as providing a net sustainable benefit, for instance during a component's life cycle (Gilenó & Turci, 2021).

We view brand awareness and identity building not only as an important player in driving brand equity in business markets in general (Davis, Golobic, & Marquardt, 2008) but also as a main factor to be considered in sustainable corporate brand identity work. Many B2B firms fail in their brand identity building because they do not consider focusing their branding activities on the dissemination of brand names and logos without developing a more comprehensive corporate brand identity, integrating actions and communication (Homburg et al., 2010). Thus, for brand awareness – i.e. the ability to recognize or recall a brand – to act as a strong signal of sustainability and supplier commitment, it needs to be considered as a key element of corporate brand identity strategies (Homburg et al., 2010). Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) observe that during the early years of a company's new venture, the corporate brand identity is unclear and rather erratic. As the company grows, a new corporate brand identity emerges, because of the co-creative process influenced by multiple internal and external stakeholders. Creating corporate brand awareness is therefore an integral part of business networking. Koporcic & Tornroos, 2019, p. 1687 claim that “a corporate brand should be understood as a temporal value outcome of interaction processes and relational investments”. Thus, it is not sufficient to study corporate branding from the individual company's perspective; it must be understood from the perspective of the network where the company is embedded (ibid.).

## 2.2. Network mobilizing

Network mobilizing is another process that drives a comprehensive sustainable corporate brand identity. It is concerned with how the network interaction aligned with the sustainable corporate brand identity work translates into behaviours that help mobilize and further build the corporate brand, embedding it into the corporate brand's daily routines and actions (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Furthermore, for the sustainable corporate brand identity work to be successful, mobilization involves making sure that the spokespersons of the different stakeholders are representative (Andersen & Åberg, 2021). According to Latour (1987, p. 172), mobilizing actors thus reflects “the ability to make a configuration of a maximal number of allies act as a single whole in one place.” In a B2B sustainability context, the pace of innovation is high (Lee & Trimi, 2021). This creates great uncertainty concerning commitment and mobilization to specific solutions among business actors, who may want to postpone commitment to solutions which are expected to be more sustainable than the ones at hand (Jia & Li, 2020).

At the same time, network initiation and change are created by mobilization (Ritvala & Salmi, 2010, p. 899). According to Ritvala and Salmi (2010, p. 899), “The network mobilizers may use different mechanisms to attract interest and mobilize the resources of others”, some of them being framing, agenda setting and social networking. In addition, mobilization is affected by both the interests and identities of the involved actors (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). Mobilizing network actors in favour of new solutions which are seen as more sustainable also comes at a cost. As pointed out, “recognizing and acting on a common issue by an actor or a large number of actors necessitate mobilization, which breaks old patterns of exchange and creates new relationships” (Ritvala & Salmi, 2010, p. 899). For sustainable corporate brand identity work in the B2B context, the process of detaching existing commitments raises a specific challenge about mobilizing actors. Replacing old technologies with new ones may leave existing dedicated resources obsolete and, correspondingly, the ability to use resources can be an important part of the sustainable corporate brand identity work processes (Adner & Snow, 2010). Finding solutions to removing such obstacles can be an important part of brand identity work, but also poses dilemmas, as they may dilute sustainable corporate brand identity work attempts (Grolleau, Mzoughi, & Sutan, 2019).

## 2.3. Ongoing actor commitment and coalignment

Since sustainable corporate brand identity emerges as a “mutually influencing social process between a company and its key stakeholders” (Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017, p. 82), the ongoing processes of commitment and coalignment among actors in a dynamic business context must not be overlooked. There is an inherent dilemma in maintaining a coherent sustainable corporate brand identity, while at the same time increasingly mobilizing and involving actors with heterogeneous sustainability agendas in developing the brand. As pointed out in sustainability research, there are trade-offs among the different sustainable development goals, for how to prioritize and sequence them. For instance, building the social sustainability dimension of a sustainable corporate brand may come with a temporary loss of profit or even loss of an environmental focus (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2010). Iglesias et al. (2020, p.39) suggest that “elucidating” is a process by which stakeholders and managers “discuss and reconcile the diverse corporate brand identity enactments and interpretations, aiming to build a shared understanding of the corporate brand identity”, which in turn implies that the co-creation processes, such as commitment and coalignment, foster an evolved shared understanding of the corporate brand identity work.

But commitment and coalignment involve more than a shared understanding. In Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987, p.23) model of buyer-seller relationship development, commitment “represents the highest stage of relational bonding and has been defined clearly in terms of three measurable dimensions: inputs, durability, and consistency.” In addition to a shared understanding, commitment and coalignment also include stakeholders dedicating activities and resources to each other over time. It, therefore, follows that being committed to sustainable corporate brand identity work implies that a coalignment between the stakeholders' activities and resources involved is necessary so that differentiation can be created and B2B organizations can reinforce their competitive advantage (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007).

Above, we identified three different processes within sustainable corporate brand identity work, i.e., *building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness*, *network mobilizing*, and *ongoing actor commitment and coalignment*. These processes are affected by and affect in turn, network embeddedness. In the analysis, we will show how the sustainable corporate brand identity work processes unfold in a business network setting, where network embeddedness supports and/or restricts sustainable corporate brand identity work.

## 3. Methodology

Given its explorative and intricate nature, a retrospective (see e.g. McKinlay, Brown, & Elmholt, 2022), qualitative single-case research method was chosen for this study. Retrospective case research is a proven way to study evolutionary processes in business networks (Bizzi & Langley, 2012). It involves the process of collecting data that refers to different points in time (Easton, 2010). In this sense, retrospective case studies provide a research design that allows for studying processes unfolding (Welch, 2000). To gather rich data on the phenomenon in the specific context, that is, a “deep understanding of a particular social setting” (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, p. 614), we adopt an intensive single case study research design. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) define the aim of the intensive case study as exploring a unique case setting from the inside by providing a thick, holistic, and contextualized description, to gain a deeper understanding of “what is going on”.

We draw on a historical case study (McKinlay et al., 2022; Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018) to understand how sustainable corporate brand identity work is carried out in B2B firms and how business network embeddedness affects this work. Studying innovations, Hargadon and Douglas (2001, p. 476) claim that: “Because the changes that accompany innovations often occur over years and even decades, historical cases can provide the necessary distance to observe how an innovation both

emerges from and reshapes its institutional environment”. Based on similar reasoning, we argue that using a historical case study enables the necessary distance to understand both the events taking place in our case story and the network embeddedness of said events. The case in question is the sustainable corporate brand identity work of Better Place, from the venture's establishment to its bankruptcy (2007–2013). The advantage of using a historical case is the possibility to follow the whole lifecycle of the business venture, albeit retrospectively. Better Place was an innovative business venture that set out to develop a multi-sided business platform for integrating energy utility companies, road infrastructure companies, battery producers, and car producers. By regarding corporate brand identity work in Better Place as a holistic and contextualized descriptive case, where sustainable corporate brand-building efforts are influenced by network embeddedness, the research design of the paper is thus based on an intensive single case study.

### 3.1. Data collection

Data was collected over five years through a variety of secondary sources, including newspaper clippings, presentations from Better Place and secondary sources, such as books, film footage, and various other data sources. The case relies on two main sources of archival data and subsequent interviews. Archival data have a strong place in theory-generating research of business network dynamics, as it allows for the exploration of patterns of change and stability, which are impossible to detect purely using interviewing and survey data (Welch, 2000). In this sense, they are not better than interview data, but they provide an important possibility for methodological triangulation, and in this sense compensate for weaknesses of other data sources. The archival data used in this project covers both internal and external data. Internal data cover press releases, internal presentations, and reports as well as video presentations by the Better Place chief executive officer (CEO). External sources include newspaper articles identified through the LexisNexis database. Several articles contain in-depth interviews with the Better Place founder and long-term CEO Shai Agassi, Better Place managers, and key partners and supporters. The data were used to construct a timeline with a chronology to keep track of the major events and developments in the networks. A key data source in this respect was accessing a database of more than 1000 relevant newspaper clips mentioning Better Place from national newspapers during the 2007–2013 period.

In addition to the secondary sources, two interviews were conducted with Danish representatives from Better Place in 2009 and 2010. The interviews were semi-structured, using a thematic interview protocol (see interview guide in Appendix 1). The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed to ensure reliability (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Although the issues at the time of the interview related to legitimacy and market entry for entrepreneurs, we also covered issues related to corporate brand identity work processes and the challenges of collaboration with stakeholders during market entry and expansion in Denmark and Israel (Andersen & Rask, 2014). One interview was conducted face to face while the other interview was conducted over the telephone. Given the low number of interviews and that they addressed a related issue, they are considered complementary rather than central sources for building the case description. We are therefore particularly cautious about the fallacies of relying too strongly on interview accounts (Mees-Buss, Welch, & Piekkari, 2022). Apart from the interviews, one of the authors attended several Better Place-presentations in the form of seminars and meetings for company representatives and other stakeholders, such as representatives from public authorities, companies exploring possibilities for investing in new car fleets, etc. These seminars provided ample possibilities for informal talks, constituting another source of complementary data. The people we interacted with through interviews and meetings were also available via e-mail, answering questions and corroborating findings. Together, triangulating all data sources helped us map the events, build a timeline and iterate between

data sources to build our case narrative, which is the foundation for the data analysis and case development.

### 3.2. Case development and data analysis

Analyzing data and reporting a case are intertwined parts of the casing process, as the research moves between matching theory and data, developing a case (Ragin, 1992). Rather than following a specific template for qualitative research, we aimed at building an approach that suited our data, while adhering to the overall aim of creating process validity (Gioia et al., 2022). Data were analyzed using a narrative strategy (Bizzi & Langley, 2012). This type of analysis is dominant in studies of single firms and their networks (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010), where the richness of detail contributes to the credibility and interest of the analysis. In this paper, we have reconstituted the events of Better Place into an extended verbal account (case narrative). Fig. 1 provides an overall timeline of the rise and fall of the Better Place venture.

We followed abductive logic in our approach, allowing for multiple theoretical musings during data analysis (Rinehart, 2021). Hence, a stepwise thematic analysis was employed as a method for identifying, organizing, describing, analyzing, and reporting themes found within a case (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To develop a coherent and transparent data structure for exploring the relationship between sustainable corporate brand identity work and network embeddedness, we relied on producing tables, iterating between different dimensions to structure and understand data patterns as well as grounding our analysis (Gioia et al., 2022; Huberman & Miles, 2002). For the sake of avoiding overwhelming complexity in the case, after describing the foundation and early days of Better Place, we zoomed in on sustainable corporate brand identity work processes in Israel and Denmark. We thus excluded Hawaii, Australia, and other possible national network contexts from our analysis. Denmark and Israel were by far the most advanced attempts at sustainable corporate brand identity work and as we saw it, the influences of network embeddedness in the other contexts did not add substantially to our findings.

The thematic analysis of combining emergent interpretations with existing theory was driven by a constant move “back and forth from one type of research activity to another and between empirical observations and theory” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 555). Thus, by using systematic combining, or an abductive approach to case study research, we have made use of a “non-linear, path-dependent process of combining efforts with the ultimate objective of matching theory and reality” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 556). The analysis began by “developing” themes rather than “identifying” themes, and thus, we acknowledge our role in thematizing instead of choosing pre-existing truths (Lahtinen & Näränen, 2020). Thus, rather than using a template to code and organize our empirical findings (Gioia et al., 2022), we developed an interpretation of the material based on an abductive approach. For instance, the sub-processes of the sustainable corporate brand identity work emerged partly through developing the theoretical framework, combining sources from branding literature and B2B network; and partly through combining the theory with our empirical evidence (Ragin, 1992). To reach the final version of the analysis, however, we needed an uncodifiable creative leap (Langley, 1999); in our case, the leap consisted of understanding the dynamic interdependence between corporate brand identity work and network embeddedness as an ongoing sustainability attempt, leading to the notion of sustainable corporate brand identity work.

## 4. Sustainable corporate brand identity work in Better Place

The grand vision of Better Place was to support a sustainable transition in transportation by developing an innovative solution for energy storage and a reloading system of batteries for electrical vehicles in the form of terminals for swapping batteries. The car battery and terminal

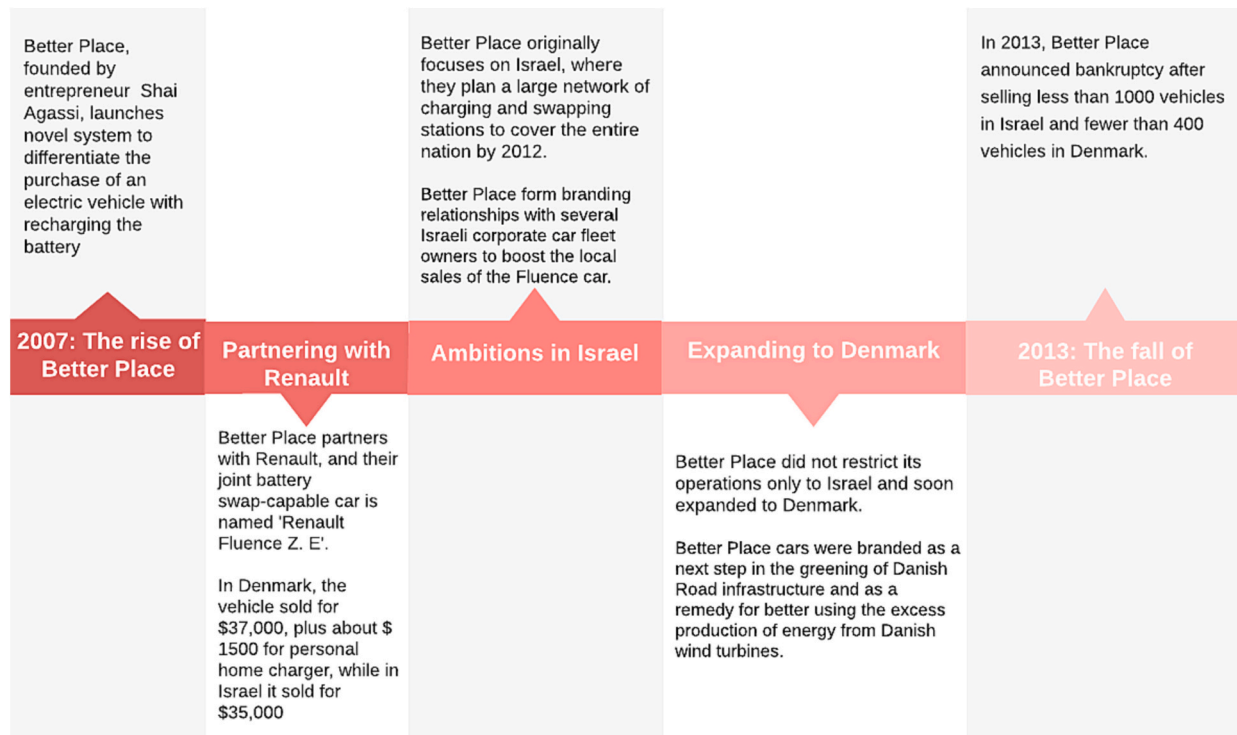


Fig. 1. Timeline of the Better Place venture.

stations were owned by Better Place. Batteries would be swiftly replaced at the roadside terminals, effectively providing a solution for the “range anxiety problem” among buyers of electrical cars, which is seen as one of the major roadblocks for the transition of private transportation into electrical automobiles. Better Place batteries could be recharged when the car was parked at users' homes, while at the same time access to the storage capacity being controlled centrally. In this sense, the installed batteries would be a “virtual power plant” to be used by utility companies to balance energy loads and store energy, as well as trade energy more effectively on the international electricity market. It would reduce the need for additional investments and operations of peak power plant capacity. Hence, theoretically, there were synergistic value and sustainability gains in combining the needs of users, car producers and electricity companies. For private users, the proposed added benefit would be drastically reduced driving costs per mile compared to cars based on a traditional combustion engine. Cars would be less expensive because a) the price of energy per kilometre would be less, b) batteries would be owned by Better Place and thus not count in the price of the car, and c) electrical cars would have fewer parts and would not break as easily, reducing the operation costs and risks for the user. Most industry analysts at the time agreed that the Better Place business model potentially represented a major leap towards a greener and better transportation system.

#### 4.1. Corporate brand identity work about the creation of the Better Place venture

From a corporate branding perspective, the Better Place venture required both a global and a local brand work effort. In both the global and the local brand work, interlinkages of actors with intersecting interests and brand identities play an important role. Better Place saw a sequence in their corporate brand identity work, where convincing actors in the local contexts such as national or regional utility companies, car dealers and eventually consumers to create a market for the offerings provided. In its turn, it would require a proven system backed up by powerful global stakeholders. This was a requirement for local actors if

they were to back up Better Place's initial corporate brand slogan “Electrical changes everything”.

Developing a viable working business model for charging and using was seen as essential for any onboarding attempts, however. The Better Place model was initially field tested in Israel, with 37 battery swapping stations in operation around Tel Aviv. A full-scale realization of the Better Place multi-sided platform would require a substantial leap of faith, in terms of investment from other business actors. Also, it would potentially interfere with several existing consumer practices as well as face the challenge of creating a new market exchange practice, involving users as both consumers and value co-creators for the utility companies. Marketing managers at Better Place worked out a corporate brand narrative, which resounded among industry analytics and was repeated in several global media. It helped the company gain access to several of the critical global stakeholders needed for realizing the market. This was important for reaching the interests of the large investor banks. The essence of this narrative is exemplified in a press release from Better Place, quoting Shai Agassi, the founder, and initial CEO, explaining their corporate vision.

*“Our global economy urgently needs an environmentally clean and sustainable approach to energy and transportation. We need to rethink how to bring together consumers, existing technology, and the entire car eco-system to establish the next-generation infrastructure that provides energy for commuters and is not dependent on liquid fuels.”* (Press release, Better Place, 2007).

There was considerable uncertainty among major industry stakeholders in the automotive industry on how to respond to the growing sustainability awareness and political turn in the mature Western economies. Major national and global economies were in the process of using regulatory means to create new CO2 emission standards. A major part of the global car manufacturers in the late 2000s was still in the process of adopting their manufacturing and technology strategy to

encompass electrical cars while recouping their capital-intensive investments in conventional drive trains.<sup>6</sup> This spurred a lot of interest among industry actors regarding possible solutions but also uncertainty about what technology roadmap for them to follow. Noticing the changes, global investors on the other hand were also on the lookout for innovative solutions that would both reduce CO2 emissions but also disrupt the existing industry and create investment opportunities. Better Place was – in other words – facing a systemic branding challenge where the brand narratives they would provide had to convince several interdependent business actors in a concerted way and where critical partnerships were of key essence for Better Place to convince other critical stakeholders and to manifest its corporate brand identity as a recharging grid operator. However, particularly, the well-esteemed financial analytics from Deutsche Bank saw Better Place's idea as strong enough to provide a potential paradigm shift in the industry. This also helped create one of the largest seed capital rounds in history. Better Place managed to raise more than 850 million US Dollars from HBSC, Morgan Stanley and other leading global investment banks, who also saw investments in building a greener and more sustainable future as well aligned with their corporate mission.<sup>7</sup>

At the time, the world's leading car manufacturers generally agreed that conventional drive trains in cars were part of the past rather than the future, but most of them were uncertain concerning the timing of their commitments in this area, as several technical and financial problems were perceived as unsolved.<sup>8</sup> With the positive press and the back-up from influential financial investors in 2007, the company managed to onboard the Renault-Nissan car manufacturer alliance, which already had brought innovativeness to the core of their corporate mission and had plans of branding themselves as first movers and leading providers of electrical vehicles – ahead of Toyota, the then leading provider of hybrid automobile drivetrains. Fig. 2 provides an overview of the corporate brand work and actors mobilized in the initial business network, as Better Place launched its business, in October 2007.

Renault-Nissan and Better Place were to work together to co-brand Better Place and the model “Fluence Z.E.”. Together they would promote the car model and the Better Place subscription service towards car dealers and ultimately end consumers. Renault-Nissan and Better Place formally committed to an order of 100,000 cars to be delivered in the period 2011–2016. Hence, a key requirement for the Better Place branding effort was to help scale up activities by fast market entry into several countries and create commitment for setting up the battery swapping infrastructure before entering the market with the combined car and subscription service package. In 2009–2010, agreements with utility companies in Israel and Denmark were lined up, and similar agreements were negotiated in the states of Hawaii and California, Canada, China and Australia, where Better Place also set up local subsidiaries to be part of local networks and engage in co-branding efforts with important stakeholders. Israel remained the lead market, and Shai Agassi was personally endorsed by the Israeli government at the time, which saw the “end oil” proposition as not only important from a sustainability perspective but also from a geopolitical perspective. The former CEO of the Renault-Nissan alliance conveyed in an interview with *Wired* magazine, that he was personally approached by Shimon Peres, the Israeli minister of state in 2007, urging him to begin a conversation with the founder of Better Place on supplying EVs to Israel, with the support of the Israeli state (Squatriglia, 2011). Integrating the activities and resources of Better Place and the car manufacturers with several actors in the national markets into a subscription-based offering to end-users would require an intensive value- and brand identity work

together with the car producers, the car dealers and with local power utility companies. Better Place developed different brand narratives for the countries in which it entered. As Better Place worked at weaving together a brand narrative aligning the many actors at local and global levels, they also came to know the territory better and were increasingly challenged by problems of becoming increasingly embedded in the web of relationships formed by the actors that would have to be mobilized for the project to work. However, the local brand work came at odds with the global efforts as it both slowed and called for substantial adaptations of the original plan. Hence, there were limits to the adaptations attempted by local brand managers in Better Place that could be accepted at the global level. For instance, giving up central elements of the value proposition, which was discussed with US stakeholders, was not a possible route for the US branch.

Better Place saw Denmark and Israel as the most mature markets for entry. However, as Better Place saw it, the market entry would require two different brand narratives and correspondingly two different brand identity work processes. In Denmark, the brand narrative is built on the perceived greenness of the market and the Danish society at large (including strong political support for green energy transition with a substantial production of wind energy in the energy mix). This would require an engagement of power grid stakeholders as well as from the proponents of wind energy. In Israel, the corporate brand narrative touted energy security as a political issue, engaging local authorities and consumers to ensure energy independence in a context of hostile countries, where there is no transnational power grid collaboration and cutting off energy supplies is a potent means in political conflicts. Relating to the other side of the business platform, Better Place branded the “virtual power plant” notion to utility companies as well, using energy security but also financial arguments; that the introduction of Better Place would help level the costs of balancing the power grid. Where the possibilities of storing and trading energy in the European power grid and the possibility of enhancing the green transition of road traffic were central elements in the brand narrative offered to political stakeholders by Better Place in Denmark, the brand narrative in Israel concerned levelling of energy in an isolated national grid and a cost-efficient solution for levelling out the possibilities for so-called brown-outs (temporary energy loss in segments of the power grid).

#### 4.2. Corporate brand identity work in Israel

In Israel, Better Place commenced its brand identity work by investing in large-scale resources to help build local relationships. A well-attended visitor centre was established in Tel Aviv in 2010, showcasing the cars along with CEO Shai Agassi's vision to “end oil”, where securitization issues along with demonstrating the Fluence EV and the benefits of driving an EV was communicated from a hologram machine showing Shai and from wall-sized screens throughout the centre. Also, Better Place formed branding relationships with several Israeli corporate car fleet owners to boost the local sales of the Fluence car. An important prerequisite for this part to be effective, however, was a fast roll-out of the urban and rural battery-swapping infrastructure. However, achieving acceptance from local communities was harder than anticipated. Although there were joint interests in branding electrical vehicles and Better Place worked towards this aim, battery swapping stations would call for several infrastructural changes in the urban areas: not only in the form of new road connections but also affecting the energy grid structures. In addition, battery charging stations, stacking several batteries underground to be loaded and swapped also potentially was a fire hazard, evoking other stakeholders' concerns. Lithium-ion batteries seldom catch fire, but due to electro-mechanical failure, they can overheat. Battery fires are extremely dangerous and very difficult to extinguish. In addition, challenging the potency of the argument for ending the dependency on oil, the world's largest gas repository, the Leviathan, was discovered in Israel in the late 2000s. This changed the dynamics concerning conveying the main branding message of Better

<sup>6</sup> Heasley, A. (2009): Leading the Charge: Cover Story, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 3

<sup>7</sup> Squatriglia, C. (2008) Deutsche Bank Loves Shai Agassi's Plan to Bring Us EVs, *Wired*, April 14.

<sup>8</sup> King, P. (2009): Assault of the Batteries, *Weekend Australia*, October 9.



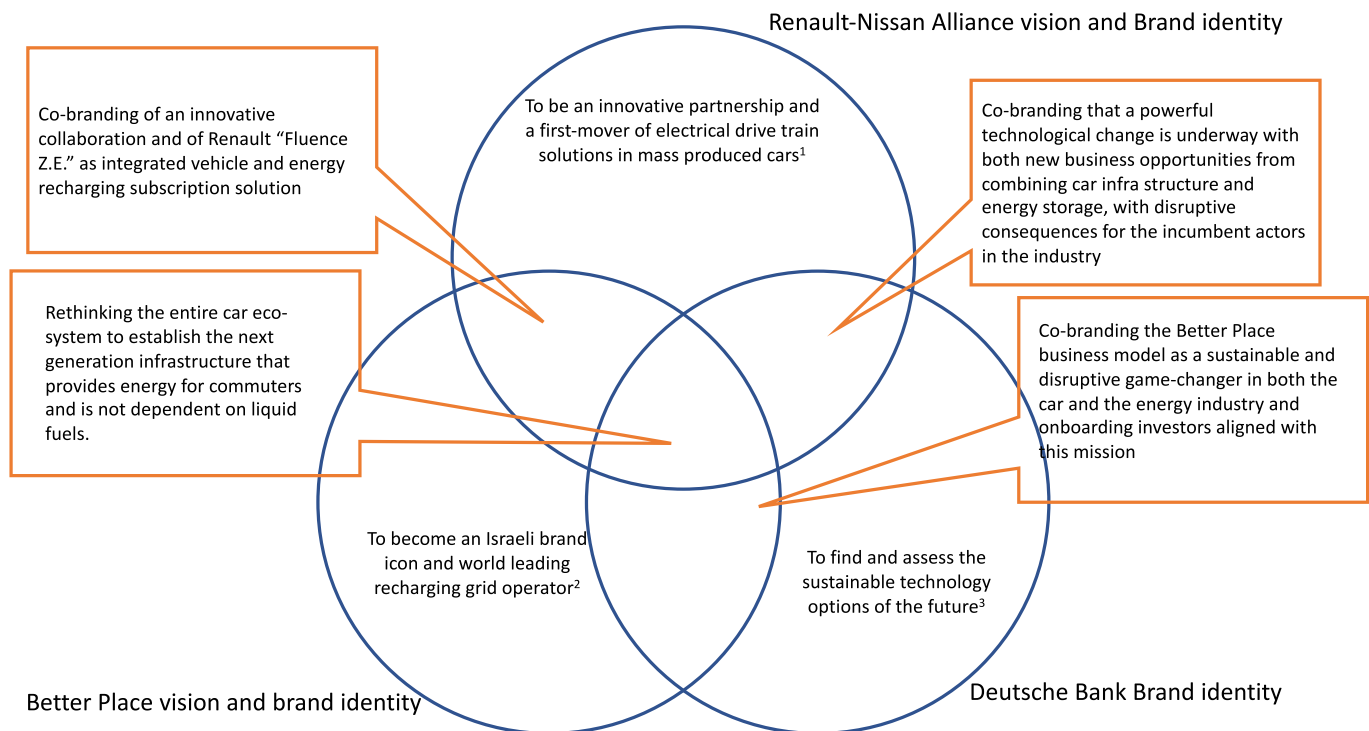


Fig. 2. Brand identities and Co-branding among global Partners Global Launch 2007.

Place towards local and national authorities, i.e., to help reduce oil dependence. Suddenly, this part of the value proposition was seen as less important. Together, these issues slowed the roll-out of Better Place considerably and in the end unraveled the perceived brand value, making investors decide not to back a second round of funding.

#### 4.3. Corporate brand identity work in Denmark

Denmark was selected as another country for advancing the Better Place Model and supporting worldwide branding. Here, another corporate brand policy was followed; to work in the paradigm shift. Better Place cars were branded as the next step in the greening of Danish Road infrastructure and as a solution for better usage of the excess production of renewable energy from Danish wind turbines. This is known as part of the “power-to-x” conundrum. Energy from wind is produced whenever the wind blows. However, this does not automatically match energy consumption, meaning that means of energy conversion or storage are required if the excess production of energy is not to be wasted. This would be achieved through storing energy in car batteries and balancing off the peaks in the power grid, establishing what was referred to as a “virtual power plant” – a resource controlled centrally by Energinet, the service provider of the grid. This would require several adaptations, which would call for further innovations and testing. One example was engaging in a test and standard development project with the Danish Ministry for Energy and the Technical University of Denmark, to “ensure interoperability for electrical vehicles, so the owners can charge their cars at any charging posts regardless of car brand, type of charging post and EV infrastructure operator”.<sup>9</sup> Then came creating a power utility market for the monetizing of charging and recharging batteries. However, for Energinet, the Danish service provider of power grid services to the utility companies, “the virtual power plant” was a costly model, which would require substantial investments in installing intelligent two-way meters (allowing

for electricity not only to be accounted for when consumed but also making it possible for consumers to sell electricity and individually set targets for how much battery drain they would allow for) at the customers' households. Although Energinet was planning for a general replacement of the (largely) analogous power meters in the Danish households, the model Better Place suggested was idiosyncratic to the battery charging needs of the Better Place model. It would commit the power grid service provider strongly to Better Place and secure Better Place's almost monopolistic access to the grid. In the end, branding the potential benefits of required changes and investments in the additional meters was seen by Energinet as contradicting both national electricity security concerns and the rules of public procurement. This contributed to prolonging the rollout of the Better Place model to a degree where the local CEO of Better Place in Denmark approached Better Place HQ for them to back an alternative branding effort in Denmark. This was rejected and the Danish CEO was ousted. A new CEO was installed, but equally unable to establish sufficient stakeholder trust and commitment. Eventually, and despite the promising contingencies of the Danish energy market, Denmark failed to become the showcase market that Better Place had hoped for.

Over time, the initial global investors lost confidence in the relative advantage of the business model, compared to emerging alternatives, and were unwilling to back a second round of seed capital. Other companies surfaced, branding other technology solutions. One is the Tesla corporation, which developed a futuristic sustainable corporate brand identity and was able to provide luxury cars which supported these values. Competitors from the conventional car industry also started to strengthen their sustainable corporate brand identity with less radical technology solutions. They developed hybrid drive trains for their cars, where the conventional engines were supported by an electrical part to a smaller or larger extent. This helped competing producers of mid-range cars such as Toyota in greening their corporate brand, without changing their current network position relative to suppliers and distributors altogether.

<sup>9</sup> DTU electro in profile (2013).

## 5. Analysis and discussion

Analyzing the Better Place case from a B2B network perspective, seeing it as an interactive and concurrent identity-shaping process, provides insights into the underlying dynamics at work when a business seeks to engage other business actors in the process of building a sustainable corporate brand identity. To structure our analysis of the case, we use the three sub-processes of sustainable corporate brand identity work – *building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness, network mobilizing, and ongoing actor commitment and coalignment* – and link these to network embeddedness. From this analysis, we can point out both supporting and restricting influences of network embeddedness on the sustainable corporate brand identity work which unfolds in the case of Better Place.

### 5.1. Building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness

As noted by Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017), during the early days of a business venture, the corporate brand identity is rather unclear. In the beginning, the task at hand for the case company was to make room for a broad understanding of the Better Place idea and value proposal, which was new to most market actors at the time. Moreover, this had to be carried out in a concerted move, as the evaluation and opinion of the stakeholders were interdependent, as often seen in sustainable innovation attempts (Inigo & Albareda, 2016). In other words, actors would be looking not only at the value proposition itself but also at how other important and powerful actors would respond to the idea. This interdependence problem reflects the systemic nature of corporate brand identity work in B2B contexts, i.e., the effects of network embeddedness. The process of gaining acceptance for a systemic and environmentally sustainable change in a network of business actors, which involves a reversal of roles, positions and value propositions is far from the linear image described in brand management textbooks. Rather, brand identity creation is better captured as “organic, in constant flux and co-created by other actors” (Iglesias et al., 2020, p.33). The creation of the Better Place brand narrative and versioning it to various groups of stakeholders was a critical part of this process (Andersen & Rask, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, business network embeddedness may have both positive and negative effects on building sustainable corporate brand identity and awareness. Better Place's relationships with business actors with financial and technological resources (e.g. Deutsche Bank and Renault-Nissan) initially helped the company in quickly scaling up brand awareness regarding their sustainable corporate brand (see Choi, Kim, and Lee (2010) for a similar effect in network diffusion). Shai Agassi's reputation among investors as a successful entrepreneur and head of product development in the SAP corporation also helped create initial legitimacy and interest among investors and industry commentators (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In the case of Better Place, the negative effects of embeddedness only showed themselves later in the process of mobilizing actors and especially concerning maintaining commitment of the mobilized business network.

### 5.2. Network mobilizing

Reflecting the flux and organic nature of the sustainable corporate brand identity mentioned above (Iglesias et al., 2020), there were coalitions among critical actors that typically were shaky and in constant peril of breaking down as other priorities, opportunities, and commitments drew them in different directions (cf. Andersen & Åberg, 2021). At the same time, network embeddedness in the form of endorsement helped build brand awareness and mobilize financial as well as political actors. Because of the actors' resource commitments (e.g. Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), the sustainable corporate brand identity work performed by Better Place helped to raise additional capital from other venture capital companies and gain interest from a broad range of stakeholders. Thus, network embeddedness in the form of social and

political aspects (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998) helped mobilize further actors for the Better Place venture, as in the endorsement from leading figures of the Israeli state.

Another dimension of network embeddedness that affected the brand identity work more negatively, consisted of the many technical issues that were activated and in need of resolution as Better Place managed to move from mobilization to commitment and coalignment. In our case, technological network embeddedness (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998) becomes increasingly prevalent in brand identity work after successful mobilization attempts when actors start to negotiate the realities of bringing the complex value proposition alive and reflect on how this impact on their brand identity and value creation possibilities. Network embeddedness showed its importance for brand identity work also in terms of increasing complexity. Notably, the several additional actors who had to adjust and make resource commitments for the Better Place venture to come into existence and how these adjustments rippled further into the activated network. Several of these embeddedness issues were only possible to identify in hindsight. They revealed themselves as Better Place successfully transgressed the landscape of business actors and faced new challenges as technological challenges gradually appeared.

The influence of actors is often geographically restricted and the institutions of national markets often (but not in all cases) work as a delimitating factor, meaning that awareness-building and mobilization efforts change with network embeddedness in different locations (cf. Halinen & Törnroos, 1998). In other words, Better Place worked with its sustainable corporate brand identity in several local networks simultaneously. The activities in several markets exhausted the company's resources when working on developing a localized version of the brand (Beverland et al., 2007). An important restricting influence from network embeddedness thus concerns aligning and synchronizing with the branding efforts of local partners (for instance, political actors in Israel or the energy partner in Denmark). This process of actors' configuration to a specific technological standard ultimately also restricted Better Place from mobilizing powerful industry actors in the US.

### 5.3. Ongoing actor commitment and coalignment

In conducting sustainable corporate brand identity work to engage important stakeholders, the commitment and positive communication from Deutsche Bank and the Renault-Nissan Alliance helped Better Place in mobilizing and spreading their main message in the mass media, but also in enriching the brand communication efforts and discourses and arenas they were able to build bridges to. This involved both commitment to and coalignment with the Better Place brand. Brand coalignment concerns the processes of co-creating brand synergies and market value from joining corporate brands (Iglesias et al., 2013; Iglesias et al., 2020), such as the brand identity profiling benefits particularly seen by Better Place and Renault-Nissan. Both Renault-Nissan and Better Place saw benefits in co-branding elements of the brand narrative; independence of oil, zero emissions, and providing a leading-edge technology to solve the EV range anxiety issue.

In some cases, the restricting influences follow as complementary parts of the supporting influences from brand commitment. For instance, for Better Place, scaling up together with the Renault-Nissan alliance also meant that they publicly committed themselves to an optimistic market forecast. According to the CEO of Renault-Nissan, 7,2 million or 10% of all sold cars worldwide would be electric by 2020. This forecast, however, was important for making it realistic that the Renault-Nissan alliance would reach a certain market target within a limited period. As a negative consequence of embeddedness, this ambitious goal also made the Better Place venture less adaptive and, in the end, failure to live up to these key performance indicators was a critical part of why the venture fell short in the investment portfolios of the large investment banks.

Network embeddedness can have both technological and temporal dimensions (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998). In several of the case incidents, technical issues can or will be resolved over time, but often the time horizon is long, uncertain, and sometimes not well enough aligned with the interests and commitments of the actors involved (Andersen & Medlin, 2016). Hence with the evolution of both supporting and focal technologies, network embeddedness is likely to change. Timing thus turned out to be an essential factor. For various reasons, actors were not ready to engage with Better Place at the time or they took more time co-aligning their branding activities with those of Better Place, making the initial process lose momentum. For example, Dansk Energi unfolded its own sustainable corporate branding initiative simultaneously with the entry of Better Place; they were in the process of rebranding themselves as a “green” energy provider and wanted to reduce the dependence on coal as an energy source. Consequently, they saw the collaboration with Better Place as one among several initiatives to help them in their efforts. This also meant that they did not agree with the prioritization of Better Place and the resources and sequence of investment needed to back up Better Place's branding efforts. Hence, the brand commitment process moved too slowly and the local car dealers in Denmark lacked back-up and were waiting for investments in the battery swapping stations. Delays followed, and in the end, the number of buyers who signed up for the Fluence EV car in Denmark was less than 500 in 2013, when Better Place gave up.

In the Israeli case, despite the initial and enthusiastic support from the Israeli government, this support did not extend to local and private actors. Although substantial subsidies had been promised to the corporate fleet service providers, they gradually changed their assumptions regarding the usefulness of Better Place in serving their branding efforts. Other solutions offered more freedom for users and were less dependent on rolling out infrastructural investments in the battery swapping stations. For that reason, the fleet providers grew less interested and enthusiastic in joining the Better Place brand narrative. Also, as the local Israeli municipalities became increasingly unsure about the potential hazards of having battery-swapping stations located in suburbs, they slowed the process and involved local authorities (for instance the local firefighting authorities in Tel Aviv). This meant that the number of actors joining the decision process grew further. All these actors also needed to be convinced by and commit to the Better Place idea. Better Place had limited resources to offer, which led to the existing network embeddedness hindering rather than helping further commitment and coalignment. Eventually, the growing complexity and the many concerns and interests of the actors involved, who did not see an immediate benefit, had a restricting influence on the sustainable corporate brand identity work as well. For instance, the network embeddedness of the Israeli counterpart in this case constituted an important restricting influence.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates the importance of network embeddedness in understanding the challenges of sustainable corporate brand identity work in a B2B context. The analysis also shows how these processes unfold in a business network setting, where network embeddedness supports and/or restricts sustainable corporate brand identity work. Analyzing the impact of network embeddedness in the Better Place case, two overall influences emerge. We address these as supporting and restricting influences from network embeddedness. Initially, network embeddedness was conducive to supporting the scaling of activities and creating awareness through spreading the brand narrative. Through its initial brand work, Better Place was able to achieve strong support from influencing actors almost instantly. The actors at the global level were unified in their work towards “changing everything” in the car industry which also created momentum for the brand identity work in the local networks, such as in Denmark and Israel. At the time when the partnership agreement was made, this was the most convincing and path-breaking solution and served Renault-Nissan's purpose of being branded as an avant-garde joint venture rooted in two conventional car manufacturing companies. However, with the

growing embeddedness, the task of engaging also grew in complexity and the pace slowed. Hence, the timing of the embeddedness increasingly became a problem for Better Place. The actors mobilized in the sustainable corporate brand identity work shared an interest as the relationships were formed, but over time the interests of these actors in being part of the Better Place corporate brand also waned. For Renault-Nissan, one critical problem had to do with the technological dimension of network embeddedness. Being part of the value proposition offered by Better Place also meant being associated with one specific technological solution, including battery recharging and replacement technology.

## 6. Conclusions and implications for theory and practice

In this paper we explored the claim that to understand the challenges of sustainable corporate brand identity work in a B2B context, the network embeddedness of firms must be considered. By introducing the concept of sustainable corporate brand identity work, i.e., *a B2B firm's activities intended to create, present, and sustain the appearance of sustainable corporate brand values and project a sustainable corporate brand identity in business networks*, we emphasize and detail both the notion of how important sustainable brand identity work is in mobilizing partnerships for sustainable development as well as the endeavors of a firm to create and maintain a sustainable corporate brand. In the case study, we demonstrated the distinct impact of network embeddedness on brand identity work. This interacted with the brand identity work and shaped it as it was dynamically co-constructed. Network embeddedness helped Better Place management access or even cut connections short to influential actors. The momentum created helped Better Place reach even further to create awareness and interest in its brand narrative. In some cases, they also managed to mobilize and commit important financial and industry actors in both global and local contexts. However, network embeddedness also restricted and slowed down the sustainable corporate brand identity work of Better Place.

We concur with the notion of this process being likened to a generative dance with important constituents rather than following a linear plan cast by a single brand owner (Cornelissen, Bekkum, & Ruler, 2006). Furthermore, the case study implies that at least for corporate brand identity work related to a complex and demanding sustainability venture, where many layers of technological complexity reveal themselves with increasing demands for commitment, network embeddedness emerges as a critical issue. The case has thus aided in our understanding of the supporting and restricting influences of network embeddedness on sustainable corporate brand identity work, an issue that organizations have long been dealing with in their activities concerning environmental sustainability.

### 6.1. Implications for theory

The paper provides several theoretical contributions. Vesal et al. (2021) point out that research on B2B markets focusing on the interface between environmental sustainability and branding is scarce. Furthermore, whether B2B brands benefit from environmental sustainability investment is unclear, and thus they call for more research to be undertaken in this area. This paper provides a response to this call by introducing and elaborating the concept of sustainable corporate brand identity work, i.e. a firm's activities intended to create, present, and sustain the appearance of sustainable corporate brand identity. By adding sustainability issues to corporate brand identity work, as well as combining it with network embeddedness, this paper also adds to Koporcic and Törnroos (2019) article elaborating on the concept of interactive network branding (thereby combining network aspects with corporate branding issues). Specifically, the paper focuses on the interactive processes between sustainable corporate brand identity work and network embeddedness (thus also answering the call from Harrison et al. (2023) for more network-level research on sustainability). Exploring the brand identity work concept involves the intricate process

of mobilizing and not least keeping business network actors aligned, as in a world of increasingly strong focus on potential climate changes, the aspirations for sustainable corporate changes over time – not only among actors in the business network but in the initiating corporate brand company as well. What we learn from the role of network embeddedness is that increasing business network complexity seems to follow from successful onboarding and commitment of additional business actors embedded in a still wider range of business contexts. Managing this complexity and sequencing brand management actions becomes an additional challenge for developing and successfully maintaining a sustainable corporate B2B brand. We think these learning points are not only relevant in the case of Better Place but also add to the understanding of possible challenges for B2B sustainable corporate branding across B2B contexts. For us, this adds to also understanding the temporality of sustainable corporate brands.

## 6.2. Managerial implications

For B2B brand managers who are engaged in corporate brand identity work – either in creating a sustainable corporate brand, or who hope to revitalize their existing brands sustainably – the study provides important insights as well. Firstly, brand managers are advised to engage in dialogues with stakeholders to attain information about their values and concerns and map out the potential dimensions of network embeddedness that are likely to influence them. This is a way to better understand and prepare for how sustainable corporate brand identity works, i.e., creating a sustainable brand narrative, will fare in the contexts where it is about to be applied. Secondly, brand managers are encouraged to thoroughly educate themselves on the sustainability issues they aim to address and the possible consequences of their actions. One way to gain deeper knowledge is to co-align and share branding activities with well-established brands in the industry like Better Place has done with the Renault-Nissan corporation. Thirdly, brand managers should ensure that their sustainability stances are aligned with the entire business strategy. In the case of Better Place, we have found that network embeddedness can have both supporting and restricting influences on sustainable corporate brand identity work. This factor should be taken into consideration by brand managers so that discrepancies can be avoided. In summary, managers and others responsible for the sustainable corporate brand identity work need to develop an understanding of how network embeddedness may support or restrict whether the sustainable corporate brand identity work will turn out to be effective or not. If the intended change is aligned with the network, the sustainable corporate brand identity work is likely to be achieved, otherwise not.

## 6.3. Limitations and further research

Like all studies, this one has several limitations, which also provide future research possibilities. The study conducted is based mainly on archival data which provides possibilities (Welch, 2000) but also limitations. More interviews would have resulted in a different narrative, wherefore future studies of sustainable corporate brand identity work could include more interview data. Furthermore, despite providing rich data and an interesting narrative, the fact that the study was based on a single case naturally limits the possibilities for generalizations. Future studies of other cases, dealing with other kinds of corporate brands, could shed further light on the processes of sustainable corporate brand identity work and how these play out in different business network settings. Another limitation of the study at hand is whether other corporate brands would display similar interactions between the sustainable corporate brand identity work and network embeddedness. We do not know whether other corporate brands would cause different interactions, wherefore more studies are needed.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

## Appendix 1: Interview protocol

All interviews were carried out by two interviewers who took turns asking questions. The themes were meant as a reminder for the interviewer, should the interviewees not cover these themselves. The interviewees were briefed in advance, so no preliminary statement of purpose is included in the protocol.

### Introductory question

1. Please tell us about your background and current responsibilities in Better Place.
2. What are your most pressing issues now?

### Direct questions

1. Which firms and other organizations do you collaborate with in [country]
2. The current setup of and plans for Better Place in [country] and the history of establishing Better Place
  - Probes: What happened then/next? Please tell us from the beginning. Current market situation
    - a. What are the topical issues relating to private transportation and who is influencing the debate?
    - b. What are the topical issues related to sustainability?
  - Probes: Can you provide examples/can you elaborate? Promoting Better Place in the Media
    - a. Responses to press releases
    - b. Media coverage of other firms
    - c. What themes are dominating/were important in the press? Why do you think that is? How would you interpret these results?
    - d. The overall image of Better Place in your country?

*Closing comments, thank you for your time, feedback, ask whether the respondent wants the final paper, can we contact them again if necessary?*

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