Accelerating transitions to sustainability by slowing down: translating sufficiency into corporate narratives

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Abstract

„Sufficiency" is beginning to emerge as a new value throughout Western societies and the question asked in this article is: Can we observe cases with actual opportunities to link successful business strategies of incumbents to principles of sufficiency? Thus, how feasible is sustainable entrepreneurship for incumbents? As an innovative conceptual approach, it will be analyzed how brand claims function as narrative translation mechanisms in situations where tensions emerge between corporate narratives and unexpected societal trends, e.g. the emergence of sufficient lifestyles. It will be shown that even though these are still a niche phenomenon, a focus on powerful brands and the narratives connected to them are an important element in understanding the role of incumbents in transitions to sustainability.

Keywords

Incumbents and sufficiency, Corporate narratives, dilemma management, sustainability transitions

1. Introduction

„Sufficiency" is beginning to emerge as a new principle or value throughout Western societies. Developments such as increasing numbers of people adopting vegetarian or vegan diets, more conscientious consumption of energy, new forms of intermodal mobility spreading in the bigger cities, and an increasing overall awareness for healthy lifestyles can be seen as signals of the emergence of more sufficient ways of life. Clearly, all of these phenomena are still elements of an emerging niche as regards their actual impact. However, it has become a niche that is to be reckoned with. It has for instance led to the emergence of institutionalised groups, e.g. the degrowth and transition town movements, or initiatives like urban gardening or community-supported agriculture, and even taken more commercial forms, such as the controversially discussed examples of a sharing economy, e.g. Airbnb and Uber [1-4]. As a consequence, there is a growing awareness for these phenomena also among large incumbent firms operating in relevant fields, such as food or mobility.

The question asked in this paper is: How do such emerging trends translate into business strategy? And what are the specific challenges of a case where new trends are in complete contrast to the way things have been done normally? Can we observe cases with actual opportunities to link successful business strategies of incumbents with principles of sufficiency?

In this paper it will be analyzed how brand claims of incumbents function as narrative translation mechanisms, in the sense that they refer to a firm's societal environment (translating societal trends to strategy), while simultaneously also shaping this environment by translating strategy into stories (directed at customers and other stakeholders). It is the aim of this paper to explore how incumbents deal with the emergence of unexpected societal trends (such as sufficient lifestyles) and a situation where tensions emerge between brand narratives and the firm's environment. It will be illustrated along brand claims by firms from two different sectors (the fast food and the automotive industry) how a brand narrative can help make it possible to "manage" the dilemma emerging between new societal imperatives like sufficiency or sustainability on the one hand, and existing path dependencies firms are facing on the other. It will be discussed whether new aspects can be adopted into an existing successful story and how new challenges can be translated and integrated into established business models.

The issues addressed in this paper are relevant for transition studies because they relate to the central question of what the role of incumbents is in a transition to more sustainable societies. Incumbents shape the configuration of relevant socio-technical systems, they are core actors guaranteeing the provision of basic societal functions such as energy, mobility or food, while at the same time contributing to the unsustainabilities of how these functions are fulfilled. In the literature, it is debated how incumbents are on the one

hand impeding structural change and how, on the other hand, they have the capabilities and assets needed to achieve fundamental changes on a broader scale [5] (p. 25); [6] (p. 956 f.). Especially when it comes to more 'radical' visions of a sustainable future, including for instance more sufficient patterns of food production and consumption or of fulfilling mobility needs in less CO_2- and resource-intensive ways, the question is whether there is a place at all for large multi-national companies in a sustainable world? How do they fit into a model where in principle it is assumed that niches are required to overturn existing regimes [7]? In order to better understand the role and potential of incumbents in transition processes, we explore how "sufficiency" – as a central element of broader notions of sustainabilty including strategies of "less", "slower", "regional" etc. – is perceived and addressed (if at all) by large companies.

The question whether and how sufficiency may emerge as a relevant issue for incumbents is not only relevant from a normative sustainability-oriented point of view. Sociological analyses of post-modern societies suggest that it will likely become a critical issue once fragile systems begin to break [8-15]. Evidence of global warming, the loss of biodiversity or overburdened global nitrogen cycles shows that planetary boundaries have been reached or exceeded already [16, 17]. As a consequence, rather than contributing to an increase in welfare, established patterns of production and consumption cause side effects that have become so large that they decrease welfare, with respect to the natural environment as well as social welfare. In the social sciences this phenomen has been discussed already in the 1990s as a typical feature of "reflexive modernity" [18]. It is argued that modern industrial societies are not anymore driven by an increase in prosperity, but rather by the side effects produced by a global risk society [19, 20]. There has recently been a growing sociological literature on these destabilising and overburdening effects on our societal systems [15, 21-28]. For instance, Dörre et al. [29] have shown that developed capitalistic societies have arrived at a tipping point where the 'double-crisis' of environmental and economic degradation cannot be solved by business as usual strategies and methods anymore. On the contrary, they often exacerbate the situation and contribute to an already ongoing crisis. While measures of fostering economic growth have for centuries resulted in the stabilisation of societies, they are now beginning to have the opposite effect. Strategies of acceleration that have in the past worked well as a means of stabilising growth societies thus in fact accelerate their degradation [12, 14, 29-31].

Against this background, the principle of sufficiency, including strategies of "less" and "slower", emerges as a niche phenomenon and slowly gains importance [32-35]. However, incumbent firms in core economic sectors continue to reproduce principles of growth and acceleration in their business strategies, because the double-crisis of modern societies to which these strategies contribute and the (resulting unintended) environmental and social

side effects usually do not affect them directly. It is rather through the various stakeholder groups of these firms, such as customers, new competitors, politicians or civil society organisations, that these 'global' issues are translated into relevant issues for day-to-day business. It is thus not just society in general, but also individual companies that have to deal with increasing pressures – in the form of increasing costs, innovative niche entrepreneurs, or changing customer demands – that are becoming more and more difficult to be met successfully by tried and tested strategies of ever increasing expansion and acceleration. Therefore, it is sensible to explore the potential of sufficiency strategies at the level of incumbent firms.

2. Theoretical background

The situation that modern societies as well as incumbent firms in key sectors such as mobility or food are facing can be described in terms of a dilemma situation. While proven growth and acceleration strategies contribute to an overall destabilisation of societies (i.e. the environment in which firms are operating) in the long term, experimenting with alternative strategies of, for instance, sufficiency may be harmful in the short term. How can such dilemma situations be dealt with by incumbent firms in practice and how can we study the role of incumbents in the transition to more sustainable societies?

2.1 Insights from management studies: how do companies deal with dilemma situations?

Implementing sufficency strategies is a challenge especially for large companies that tend to achieve stability by continuously expanding. In what ways can these companies deal with a situation where macro-trends such as demographic change and emerging shifts in societal values make (quantitative) stagnation a basic principle in business and a societal reality eventually? So far, management and economic studies have not addressed this question to a reasonable extent [12, 36-38]. At the same time, early signs can be observed of companies adapting to changing circumstances: the food industry begins to accommodate customer demands for organic, regional, vegetarian and vegan products, in the car industry mobility services and sharing concepts are being developed. Such adaptive strategies are often part of otherwise more traditional approaches within a sector or even a single company. This can be a balancing act between 'expansive' and 'reductive' strategies within a specific business model, which requires some form of paradox- or dilemma-management [39-41]. In principle, most companies have to deal with various types of paradox- or dilemma-situations. For instance, it has to be weighed carefully what degree of centralisation or decentralisation of a company's management is useful, or what the right balance is between flexibility and

standardisation in production processes. Thus, most incumbent firms are in fact quite experienced in balancing different, sometimes conflicting or inconsistent, strategies and goals.

2.2 Narrative approaches as a way of dealing with dilemma situations

Based on findings from research on strategy and organizational change it can be shown that narratives play a central role in processes of inner-organizational change initiated proactively or as a reaction to changing environments. Narratives in this context are stories embodying core values, corporate identity and the mission of a firm, e.g. taking the form of brand claims. They are characterized by their ability to create meaning and provide orientation and they are thus a central means of dealing with novelty, unexpected events and uncertainty.

In principle, the term narrative describes the way that a specific event or sequence of events is put into a coherent story: „A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events" [42] (p. 205). Coherence and order is achieved by developing a plot and providing a temporal context, usually along the basic structure of beginning, middle and end [43-46]. As a working definition, four interrelated characteristics of a narrative can be identified that distinguish it from other forms of written or spoken text. First, a narrative contains various elements or events that are related to each other in such a way that they form a coherent whole. Second, these elements are connected by a causal pattern, a logical course of action. They are given meaning insofar as they contribute to the development of the storyline – not because they fit into a chronological order or belong to specific categories as for instance in a list (or a strictly scientific text). Third, it can be shown that this type of emplotment in a coherent narrative necessarily means that events or episodes of the narrative have been selected from a (theoretically) infinite number of potentially relevant events. It is important to note that in this way narratives function as a means of interpreting and structuring reality. Fourth and finally, a narrative orders its constituting elements in time and space resulting in a specific not (necessarily chronological) sequence of events [47] (p. 27 f.).

Increased interest in narrative approaches can be traced back to the "linguistic turn" emerging in the social sciences and humanities in the 20th century, which produced a new perspective on the role of language in general: language is not just a means of depicting or describing an objective reality, it much rather fulfils a complex function of, on the one hand, understanding and making sense of the world around us – and, on the other hand, of eventually also shaping reality through human action. Ricoeur's [48] approach of differentiating between three levels of *mimesis* shows how narratives work and why their role is central in human experience (of and in time): *Mimesis II* describes the structure of a specific narrative, its content or storyline as it is told in the present. *Mimesis I* can be understood as the precondition for this narrative: it depicts the world or the reality that the

narrative refers to in more or less direct ways in retelling and interpreting the past). *Mimesis III* describes the outcome a narrative produces by having an impact on the listener and influencing his or her actual behavior in the future. In simple terms, narratives are the medium with which human beings make sense of their complex environment, this experience then shapes the way they behave and act, which in turn shapes their environment that is again perceived and experienced in the form of narratives. Narratives thus do not simply reproduce events, because what is a relevant event has to be selected from a complex and sometimes chaotic environment. Narratives are the very mechanism by which events are selected and ordered and they give meaning to a specific experience. Such conceptualizations are captured, for instance, in the idea of human beings as "homo narrans" [49, 50], or „storytelling animal" [51], who learns and understands in a narrative mode [43]. Since human action is shaped by the way one's existence in the world is experienced it critically depends on how this process unfolds in the narrative patterns that create meaning and order [52] (p. 23).

For large incumbent firms, narratives fulfil two specific functions: on the one hand, they help make sense of the organization's external environment, the often changing framework conditions and ambiguous trends, and on the other hand, narratives play an important role in internal management processes by shaping the mission, organizational identity and strategic goals of a firm. These narratives fulfilling internal and external functions are often condensed into catchy slogans or powerful claims associated with specific brands. They also play an important role when faced with dilemma situations or in processes of organizational change: Narratives are not just a form of representation or reproduction of events, they are much rather a means of interpretation and a medium for making sense of human experience and one's environment – and thus, their basic function is to provide orientation and enable human agency. Recent approaches in management and organization studies emphasize this specific aspect in the study of narratives and their role in organizational learning and innovation processes, e.g. when dealing with "unusual experiences" [53], when conceptualizing strategy as practice [54], or when studying "organizational storytelling" [44]. The underlying research question in all these approaches is how language as a cultural technique creates meaning, how this contributes to problem-solving processes and enables organizational change. In that sense, a central characteristic of narratives is that they have a transformative potential: through interpreting, selecting and newly combining the elements of a story they create the necessary precondition for the emergence of an alternative course of action, for new and untested practices and behavior. Especially in dilemma situations characterized by complexity and uncertainty, narrative approaches are promising both from a theoretical and a practical perspective: it can be analyzed how narratives "act as triggers and probes, not formulae, for action" Bartel and

Garud, [55] (p. 111), how they "impart legitimacy to new ideas by establishing plausibility rather than removing doubt" (p. 112) and how they encourage actors "to carry innovative ideas to fruition" (p. 114).

2.3 The role of narratives in transitions to sustainability

The field of sustainability transitions research builds on innovation studies as well as concepts from sociology and evolutionary economics to study fundamental and long-term change in socio-technical systems, such as transport, energy, water and agri-food systems [6, 56]. A particularly important role is played by large incumbent firms that dominate socio-technical fields, such as the transport sector or the food industry. Due to their influence and resources they could potentially be important for fostering the breakthrough of alternative solutions and an acceleration of sustainability transitions. However, since fundamental change to current systems threatens their vested interests, they usually use their power to prevent change and secure their current positions [5] (p. 25); [6] (p. 956 f.). A narrative perspective as outlined above offers relevant insights for the field of sustainability transition research: Narratives represent the dominating structures constraining or enabling action (e.g. of individual firms) and they make these structural conditions empirically observable. At the same time, the act of narration or storytelling as social practice shows how actors can actively shape structure and thus foster transitions to sustainability. Especially for the question whether there is potential for large incumbents to adopt sufficiency into their business strategies, a narrative perspective may offer new insights.

The aim of this paper is to offer a first attempt of exploring the role of narratives in the way that incumbents deal with unexpected or controversial external trends that puts them in a dilemma-situation: sufficiency as an emerging niche is an example where the new external influence is in radical contrast to incumbents' established strategies and dominant system structure, thus taking up this trend early threatens their entire existence, while ignoring it completely may in the long term threaten system structures and thus the basis of their existence. Obviously, there is no straight-forward solution to problems with a dilemma character. Narratives have been proposed as a way of dealing with such situations, in so far as they help make sense of complex or chaotic circumstances and because they can offer a perspective that goes beyond the "either-or"-type decision of a dilemma. They can take the story to a different level, expanding and opening up new mental search spaces and thus also the scope of action.

Thus, narratives serve as heuristics that can provide orientation in dilemma situations characterized by complexity and uncertainty. As pointed out by the German Advisory Council on Global Change in its flagship report on the Great Transformation: "Narratives reduce complexity, create a basis for current and future-oriented action plans, are a foundation for

the co-operation between actors, and support reliability of expectations" [57] (p. 84). In a similar vein, narratives can serve as 'boundary objects' [58] and thus improve processes of translation and knowledge integration between different actors, e.g. between companies and their external stakeholders, or, more generally, between niche and regime. The analytical focus from a transitions perspective is thus on the role of narratives as translation mechanisms and catalysts for change, which can be a useful perspective for the study of sustainable entrepreneurship and the challenges this entails for incumbent firms.

3. Methodology

Following on from the theoretical considerations of the previous sections, the aim of the cases from the fast food and the automotive industry presented in the following is to provide a brief illustration of what we want to explore: i.e. seeing how brand claims may function as narrative translation mechanisms for incumbents in transition. In both cases, it will be explored what types of narrative can be distinguished in different brand claims and it will be discussed in how far and to what degree they have the potential for broadening the solution space for dealing with current dilemma-like transformation challenges. In order to do so, the analysis proceeds as follows: As a first step, brand claims of selected industry leaders in both sectors will be identified. These will be embedded in their broader societal and industry context, to establish the "background story" of these otherwise isolated narrative elements. For that purpose, the major challenges the two industries and the specific incumbent firms are faced with are outlined briefly. It will then be traced how the respective brand claims have changed over time, responding to challenges and crises, as in the case of McDonald's. The second case of the automotive industry shows that the story may not only change over time, but there may be competing narratives forming simultaneously and even within single firms, e.g. across different business fields, such as traditional car manufacturing on the one hand, and mobility services or green vehicle technologies on the other. The aim then is to explore how the brand narratives relate to the traditional core businesses in the fastfood and the automotive industry respectively, and in how far they also relate to new crises and alternative trends such as sufficiency. It is argued that this is where a potential starting point for business and regime transformations can be found and where more research is suggested to be worthwhile. A critical perspective is applied and questions of materiality and threats of greenwashing and "niche capture" by incumbents are being discussed as crucial aspects of this type of research.

4. Cases: Changing narratives in the fast food and the automotive industry

In the following sections the two cases are presented: changing brand narratives in the fast food and the automotive industry. The aim of discussing these short cases is to survey a number of brand claims with regard to their potential ability to remain connected to established corporate narratives and simultaneously manage to open up to new external demands. As a first case, the food industry is faced with societal trends that can be connected to the emerging sufficiency niche, for instance in terms of decreasing meat consumption in some sections of society replaced by vegetarian or vegan diets, demand for more ethical animal farming, or the emergence of a slow food movement. These trends are in sharp contrast especially to the strategies of fast food companies and it will be explored whether, and if so how, brand claims of incumbents in the fast food sector have changed. Second, the automotive industry is also one of the sectors currently facing problems that can at least partly be attributed to systemic growth crises, e.g. the saturation of markets with less and less opportunities to expand (this holds true only for Western industrialized countries of course), or increasing congestion in cities, especially also in developing countries, which requires building smaller cars and using – and thus selling – less of them. It will be explored in this case as well whether and how incumbent car manufacturers take up this challenge in their brand narratives.

4.1 Changing narratives in the fast food industry: Good food fast?

Nutrition has become a considerable driver of increasingly exceeding some planetary boundaries (e.g. climate change, nitrogen and phosphorus cycle, change in land use). For example, about 20 percent of the total material flows of Germany are caused by the food sector [59] and agriculture in Germany accounts for more than 13 percent of the German total greenhouse gas emissions [60]. Considering that there is continued population growth, change in worldwide eating habits with an overall increasing consumption of meat and dairy products and the development of a western lifestyle oriented global middle class [61, 62], the use of resources for food production and the related environmental pollution and emissions will continue to rise. Macro-trends, such as the increasing number of single households, due to urbanization and individualization, flexibility of labour and time constraints further contribute to an increasing consumption of convenience products and fast food [62, 63]. Especially the traditional fast food sector – often characterized by products with high meat and fat components – promotes environmental but also health problems. Lifestyles in industrialised countries are characterised by lack of exercise, stress and unbalanced diets [64]. In Germany, roughly 50 percent of adults are overweight and around 20 percent of the

population are obese [65, 66]. This leads to noticeable effects on the health care system: so-called civilisation diseases cause approximately 80 billion €, i.e. a third, of total healthcare expenditure in Germany [65, 67].

The fast food industry has emerged as the symbolic representation of an efficient, globalised and systemically organised food production with its advantages and increasingly visible disadvantages. Especially McDonald's as one of the industry leaders has become a symbol of this type of modernity and gave rise to the term "McDonaldization" [68]. Companies like McDonald's are, as a consequence, also affected by the economic and social double-crisis of modernity in many ways. This has eventually led to decreasing revenues for industry leader McDonald's in Germany as well as its home market in the US [69-71]. A business transformation towards a more sustainable McDonald's would require a reformulation of the principles "more", "faster", "global" in the original brand narrative and focusing on the new story behind the brand claim "good food fast" introduced for the first time in 2009 [72, 73]. The central question is whether this new narrative can include values connected to sufficiency, such as „slower", „less" and „regional" without giving up on its core brand promise. On the one hand, there is a slowly growing but still relatively small absolute number of consumers interested in regional and organic products, eco-labels, veganism and slow food [74-76]. Reacting to these emerging trends, McDonald's has changed elements in its product range and included healthier and organic products. On the other hand, „customers want the familiar, typical and reliable McDonald's taste" [77] (p. 1). Such ambiguities are especially challenging for incumbents, because they are subject to significant path dependencies in their value chain and as regards their usually widely-known brand narratives.

However, McDonald's is a good example how brand claims can, in principle, remain a stable embodiment of core values while also taking up new trends and adapting to changing environments. "Good food fast" can mean a lot of different things, because what counts as good food and what is an acceptable speed qualifying as "fast" is socially constructed and subject to change over time. Thus, in principle, this brand claim could include sufficiency strategies resulting in less meat, healthier products, regional value chains without causing "semantic errors" in the overall McDonald's narrative. There have in fact been experiments with introducing Veggi Burgers [78], with completely vegetarian restaurants [79], and the success story of the McCafè shows that "fast" can mean very different speeds. Similarly, the slogan "I am loving it" in McDonald's advertising campaigns also includes a rather undefined "it" that is loved by the customers and thus subject to changing customer needs and values.

Looking at two of the main competitors in the fast food industry, it can be shown that other brand narratives seem much less flexible: Pizza Hut and Burger King, for example, carry their main products in the company name, leaving much less room for change. In the

case of Burger King the slogan "Home of the Whopper" also points to a much more product-focused narrative where it is more difficult to imagine ways of including sufficiency strategies without causing damage to its core image.

4.2 Changing narratives in the automotive industry: innovation for sustainable mobility?

Some general observations can be made that indicate the emergence of a systemic crisis affecting the automotive industry: saturated markets, congestion, environmental problems and stricter political regulation [80] can be interpreted as symptoms of a destabilising system caused by self-reinforcing growth and acceleration strategies. First, decreasing volumes of car sales in Western industrialised countries of Europe and North America show that these markets are increasingly saturated and possibly "peak car" has been reached [81] (p. 11); [82]. Therefore, proven growth strategies cannot solve but will rather aggravate this emerging crisis. At the same time, the current business model of car manufacturers heavily depends on the need to realise economies of scale to deal with low profit margins. Thus, we have arrived at a point where new solutions are lacking and the automotive industry is more vulnerable than ever before [83] (p. 999). One strategy of car manufacturers to deal with this problem is to expand into new markets, especially in Asia or Latin America. However, these strategies are meeting unexpected difficulties in entering these emerging markets, due to price instabilities or lacking infrastructures. And, as a second symptom of a systemic crisis, there are increasing traffic-related problems in cities, such as congestion and local pollution, which decrease quality of life in cities at a time when increasing numbers of people live in urban areas – especially in the targeted emerging economies [ibid.]. Third, the ever-increasing acceleration and expansion of automobility has led to ecological problems, including global warming, environmental pollution and resource scarcity, which also threaten the systemic basis of the automotive industry's existence. However, environmental issues are so far only indirectly affecting the industry incumbents through demands by various stakeholder groups ranging from civil society, politics and, to a lesser degree, customers [80] (p. 478 f.). Fourth, the at least slightly increasing political pressure on the automotive industry, e.g. in the form of emissions regulation and sustainability-oriented traffic planning and management, can be interpreted as a signal that the emerging problems are becoming more manifest and critical to voters [ibid.].

How do incumbents in the automotive industry deal with this situation where the first signs of a systemic crisis become apparent, but where they can still rely on their historical success, economic power and the corresponding political influence? How do brand narratives build on the symbols of an automobile culture and how do they take up alternative paths to a new culture of mobility?

Core elements of the brand narratives of incumbent car manufacturers follow storylines of acceleration and growth that are rooted in more general narratives of progress and freedom as cultural values. A central theme in which these plots and values are embodied is technological innovation – as a tradition of car-makers as well as a solution for the future. The current focus on e-mobility and mobility services is interesting in this respect, because electric vehicles can be characterised as a "two-world technology" that can in principle exist in today's mobility system but (especially when combined with carsharing services) is also imagineable as a central element of a radically different, more sufficient mobility system. Innovation narratives related to e-mobility and carsharing can thus be an example for corporate narratives that relate to the successful core of a brand while at the same time making a future imagineable that keeps the core value/element of a brand intact. For instance, Daimler's brand claim "The best or nothing" is a quote by Gottlieb Daimler and thus establishes a direct link to the company's long history as inventor of the automobile and main driver of innovation [84] (p. 17). Similar to the case of McDonald's, "the best" can mean anything, depending on the more concrete values it is related to. These can be traditional values of an automobile culture just as well as new concepts of sustainable mobility. At worst, "The best or nothing" can be an empty catch-phrase, but it can also be part of a narrative that preserves the traditional core brand promise, while working completely different as regards products, services, value creation, i.e. the day-to-day operational business. Such narratives could thus potentially open up the search space for solutions to a dilemma situation where proven growth strategies do not fit a saturated market, e.g. looking into new business models such as the often discussed transition from car manufacturer to mobility service provider. Arguably, another premium car manufacturer has moved a bit further in its brand communication. BMW's brand claim has changed from "The ultimate driving machine" to "Efficient Dynamics" and "DriveNow" for its carsharing service. Thus, there is a tendency to focus less on the car itself and increasingly more on mobility as such [85]. The same is true for Daimler's "car2go" where the emphasis is more on an innovative and flexible type of mobility, rather than the specific type of car offered with this service. Such brand claims may guide the way in new directions, while still preserving the incumbent's identity and historical roots.

It is important to note, however, that the "new narratives" are confined to specific brands or business sections and do not guide Daimler or BMW as a whole. Their core brand is still one of car manufacturers rather than mobility service providers [86]. The Daimler Group is a good example of how a variety of individual and more specific brand claims are derived from the overall narrative unfolding around "The best or nothing". For the premium cars of Mercedes-AMG "the best" basically translates to most powerful ("Driving

Performance"), while in other segments reliability and safety are the gold standard ("Trucks you can trust"), and car2go emphasises the best way to get around in the city of the future.

Overall, when looking at actual strategies and product portfolios of car manufacturers today, the 'old' automotive industry still seems to be relatively stable. The focus of incumbents is not so much on experimenting with innovative business models or rethinking mobility for the future. The basic approach of industry R&D is geared toward a technological fix of emerging problems – possibly arriving at an economic and environmental win-win outcome. Dealing with the more fundamental, underlying challenges of a car-centered, ever-expanding and accelerating system is thus even being avoided proactively [87] (p. 1377); [88] (p. 1687). While some of the corporate narratives of automotive incumbents do have the potential to transcend old problem definitions and boundaries of solution spaces, there is still no convincing and completely spelled-out alternative waiting to replace the old story of automobility as a whole.

5. Discussion: A narrative approach to business transformation

In both cases, the fast food and the automotive industry, brand claims have been identified that could potentially help to broaden the solution space in a transition or dilemma situation. For instance, in "good food fast", „good" can mean different things, depending on changing societal values, or in the automotive industry, a core narrative around innovation may open up new paths from car manufacturing to mobility services. However, the critical question is: do we really see a potential for sustainability transitions carried by industry incumbents? Or is this wishful thinking and is what has been illustrated here just another case of corporate greenwashing? Thus, ultimately: Do narratives really matter? Or are corporate slogans and brand claims really just stories or some form of strategic marketing communication that has not necessarily much to do with a firm's actual business and day-to-day operations?

What can be observed in many cases is greenwashing of business-as-usual through marketing campaigns. In the case of the fast food industry, images are created of regional food production in traditional farms and various types of eco-labels are developed. In the case of the automotive industry, selected flagship products, such as electric vehicles, or innovative mobility services aim to show an overall focus on sustainability, whereas the core business has not really changed substantially. There are many more examples of this kind across all sorts of industries and the generally ambivalent role of industry incumbents in transitions to sustainability has been discussed by various authors in the field [89-93]. Also in the public sphere, the most blatant cases of corporate greenwashing regularly become

broadly discussed scandals and they are exposed by environmental or consumer protection NGOs and the media.

This is where the relation between industry incumbents and their societal environment becomes very direct and tangible and this is also why it is argued here that corporate narratives do in fact play a vital role and that researching this issue does offer a potential for better understanding the role of incumbents in sustainability transitions. Narratives are not purely "virtual" in nature, they are not completely separated from actual product decisions and production processes. Referring back to the sense-making and orientation function of narratives it can be shown that they have a very direct impact on agency, within a company's internal organization and in its external environment. Especially the stories told by large industry incumbents in the form of strong brands are met with high public attention. Therefore, their impact is comparably large while at the same time they are under close scrutiny. It is important for firms with widely known brands to be transparent and to appear credible as regards their basic claims, in order to prove to their stakeholders that their stories are consistent with what they are actually doing. Once a large incumbent, like McDonald's or Daimler, enters the stage and tells a story about sustainability, there is no turning back and there will be a lot of attention. The firm puts itself in a situation where societal stakeholders will demand a high degree of transparency and proof that the new story is not just an expression of good intentions or an example of superficial greenwashing but translates to actual and substantial change. What is more, once a narrative is out, the firm cannot autonomously withdraw it again and there will be others entering the arena of communication, re-telling the narrative and steering it in new directions. Crude attempts of reclaiming narratives or using narratives to gloss things over will provoke critical reactions in most cases and this type of superficial corporate sustainability communication will usually backfire.

Apart from translating a company's core message to its external environment, a corporate narrative also provides internal orientation. Narratives are needed that translate external demands into internal strategies. The importance of a credible internal narrative becomes apparent when looking at a case where organizational change was not achieved due to the failed alignment of a new story with an established brand narrative. What happens when there are substantial conflicts regarding the 'right' brand narrative among important stakeholders can be shown by the example of Pepsi: CEO Indra Nooyi has tried to change not only the product range, but also to reconfigure the whole business model towards new values of a healthy lifestyle by restricting commercials of thickeners (including Pepsi Cola) and offering whole grain snacks, yogurt and fruit juice. In the end, the business model transformation from a softdrink manufacturer to a provider of healthy nutrition has failed, which was mostly due to internal arguments regarding such a substantial transformation of

the core narrative determining the business model of Pepsi [94]. This case indicates that corporative narratives matter not just as a one-way means of communicating a given message to internal or external stakeholders, narratives may in fact carry an actual potential for change – or failure, especially where they are not able to function as a bridge between changing values and strategies.

Thus, corporate narratives have to be found that can meaningfully deal with societal challenges and at the same time stay true to the core business of a firm. Whether intended or not, such a narrative has the potential to find new pathways and solutions by opening up problem definitions and the way a problem is framed (see Fig. 1). This may lead to a broader range of possible solutions being considered when searching for ways of addressing a problem. There may also be new impulses, because the narrative needs an audience and thus involves external stakeholders, sometimes as unwanted providers of ideas or critical commentators holding the firm accountable.
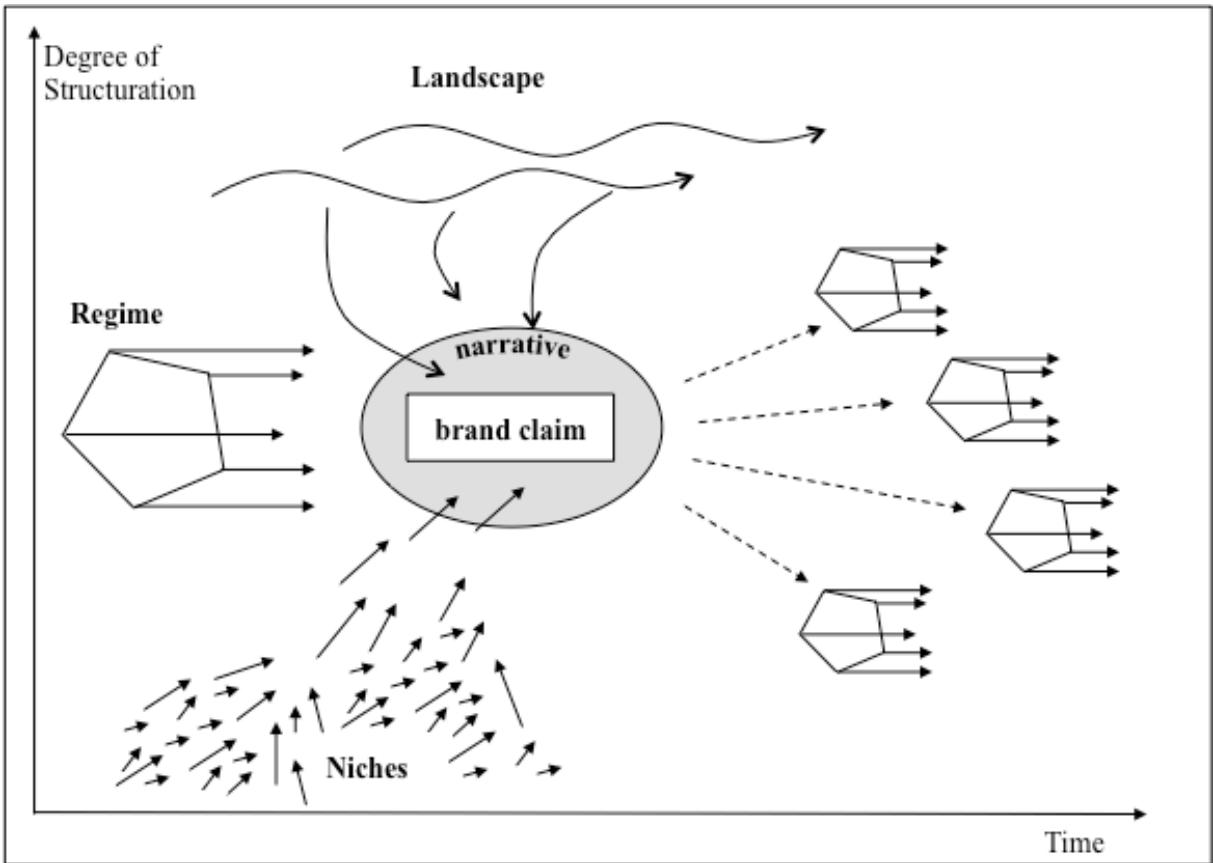

Fig. 1: Corporate narratives as an approach of dealing with the "transition dilemma" (based on [95] (p. 25): A Multi-Level Perspective on Transitions).

A successful corporate narrative is thus not created by the firm as the storyteller alone, it is also shaped by the way it is perceived by external stakeholders and this is reflected back onto a story's origin. There is a chance that a learning space emerges from this communicative process that is shared by the respective firm and its stakeholders, such as

the industry or sector as a whole, policy-makers and civil society. The narrative can in this way open up an arena for exploring dilemma situations and the possibilities and limits of a sustainability transition involving industry incumbents. The corporate narrative functions as a translation mechanism between corporate strategy and societal trends as well as an indicator of fit between the two worlds: a corporate narrative will become weak or inconsistent once the story becomes too much out of touch with the firm's external environment.

Such narratives must be able to deal with paradoxical issues or dilemma situations, as in the examples of this paper where sustainability-oriented changes in the form of sufficiency strategies are opposed to existing path dependencies requiring expansive strategies, and these narratives can be a vital element of an overall business model resilience [96, 97]. Since there are no simple and straight-forward solutions in dilemma situations, they can meaningfully be addressed only by carefully considering the specific case. A narrative can be the container for the process of readjusting strategies and continuously (re-)aligning corporate goals and strategies with societal dynamics and values. Corporate narratives can thus be an important element in increasing a business model's overall resilience in the transition to sustainability. It can help translate external trends in such a way that innovative ideas can be developed and implemented internally and by reconnecting these internal strategies and activities with external stakeholders creating a better mutual understanding and accountability. The narrative core of a brand, its value and respective vulnerability can serve as mutual reassurance that there will be credible action. Thus, corporate narratives, especially when connected to strong brands and large incumbents, can potentially be important catalysts for change.

Some of the corporate narratives embodied in the brand claims briefly illustrated in this paper have the potential to contribute to a proactive approach towards the challenges of a sustainability transition in the food and transport sectors. To varying degrees, they do point to more fundamental questions. At the same time, it can be shown that, for instance, narratives constructed around positive future visions of sustainable e-mobility do not automatically translate into feasible strategies and development pathways for the automotive industry as a whole [98]. Similarly, despite a growing selection of "green" products, the BigMac remains a McDonald's bestseller and burgers are the key product McDonald's is associated with. Further empirical research is needed for a more in-depth understanding of the translation function of corporate narratives – translating between internal and external worlds, and from old path dependencies to new approaches – as part of a wider research agenda focusing on the role and potential of incumbents in sustainability transitions.

6. Conclusions

Business transformations to sustainability present a dilemma for most incumbent firms, especially when this means going beyond concepts of green innovation and includes sufficiency strategies. Even though sufficient lifestyles are still a niche phenomenon, it has been shown that the still dominating growth strategies, for instance in the food and automotive industry, contribute to structural crises. Incumbents are slowly beginning to face this challenge, which can be described in terms of a dilemma: If incumbents stick with their proven strategies and business models they contribute to the emerging crises, which will most likely affect them in the long run. However, if they transform their business model in radical ways, e.g. by implementing sufficiency strategies, they will most likely fail in the short run. The question thus is, how can sufficiency strategies as vital part of a future more sustainable economy be translated into today's business models? It has been argued that narratives are needed that can deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of such a situation. Theory suggests that narratives can help make sense of complexity and provide orientation, thus enabling agency in such dilemma situations. Brand claims are a specific type of narrative that embody the self-conception and mission of a firm and communicate these to internal and external stakeholders. The cases from the fast food and the automotive industry that have been discussed briefly suggest that brand claims can be identified, which have the potential to be part of transitional narratives bridging the gap between the past and the future. What characterises them is that they preserve the core of an incumbent's business model, while at the same time including new, sometimes even contradictory elements (e.g. "good food fast", "car2go"). Looking at these cases has been a first exploratory step, while establishing in detail the causal links between narrative and actual transformation is a challenging research objective that cannot be achieved here. This is part of a broader research agenda that connects to the literature on the role of incumbents in sustainability transitions. The aim of this paper has been to explore basic concepts and relevant research questions as a starting point. Further research is needed:

- Empirically, what narratives can be identified that have the potential to address the dilemma situations incumbents are faced with in the transition to sustainability?
  - What are basic characteristics of such narratives?
  - How do they change over time?
  - How are they transformed by different narrators?
- Conceptually, how do narratives work as a translation mechanism?
  - In what ways can problems be reframed, how is learning and innovation induced, and how do they enable concrete action?
  - What can be learned from literatures on narratives and organizational change, dilemma management and other related fields for transition studies?

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- With regard to actual transition management on the ground, what are signs that the studied narratives amount to more than just some type of greenwashing?
  - Does a brand claim gain public attention and is thus subject to critical observation?
  - Is communication with stakeholders transparent and credible?
  - Do the stories told correspond to efforts undertaken with regard to products, production processes and business models?

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