



Action of middle manager in interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability: a theoretical essay

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Purpose of the study: to understand, from a theoretical essay, how the middle manager performs in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability.

Methodology/approach: Theoretical essay based on the approach of a narrative literature review.

Originality/relevance: It is based on the lack of studies addressing the role of middle managers in the interconnections between strategizing and sustainability, making this study relevant to the discussion and expansion of research scope in the field of strategy.

Key findings: Arguments regarding the strategic relevance of sustainability in organizations; the various ways in which *middle managers* act in the interconnections between strategic actions and sustainability; the construction of meaning to legitimize sustainability actions; and a theoretical representation of the role of middle managers in the interconnections between strategizing and sustainability.

Theoretical/methodological contributions: this study revealed that, in the execution of their roles (facilitator, implementer, advocate and synthesizer) and when a position oriented towards sustainability strategies is adopted, middle managers receive a new assignment, that of promoting sustainability strategies within the organization.

Social/management contributions: this study corroborates the need to promote sustainability actions in a practical way in organizations to find a state of synergy between the organization and environment, with the middle manager being an important agent in the process of creating meaning for strategies focused on sustainability.

Keywords: Middle Manager, Strategizing, Sustainability, Strategy as Social Practice, Theoretical Essay

A atuação do *middle manager* nas interlocuções entre *strategizing* e sustentabilidade: um ensaio teórico

Objetivo do estudo: compreender, a partir de um ensaio teórico, como ocorre a atuação do *middle manager* nas interlocuções entre *strategizing* e sustentabilidade.

Metodologia/abordagem: Ensaio teórico embasado no enfoque de uma revisão narrativa da literatura.

Originalidade/Relevância: Baseia-se na carência de trabalhos que tratem sobre a atuação do *middle manager* nas interlocuções entre *strategizing* e sustentabilidade, tornando o estudo relevante para a discussão e ampliação do escopo de pesquisas no campo da estratégia.

Principais resultados: Argumentos sobre a relevância estratégica da sustentabilidade nas organizações; as diferentes formas de atuação do *middle manager* nas interlocuções entre o fazer estratégico e sustentabilidade; a construção de sentido para que ações de sustentabilidade sejam legitimadas; e uma representação teórica da atuação do *middle manager* nas interlocuções entre *strategizing* e sustentabilidade.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas: este estudo revelou que, na execução de seus papéis (facilitador, implementador, defensor e sintetizador) e quando assumida uma postura orientada às estratégias de sustentabilidade, o *middle manager* recebe uma nova atribuição, a de promover estratégias de sustentabilidade dentro da organização.

Contribuições sociais / para a gestão: este estudo corrobora a necessidade de promover ações de sustentabilidade de forma prática nas organizações para que se encontre um estado de sinergia entre organização e ambiente, sendo o *middle manager* um importante ator no processo de criar sentido para estratégias com foco em sustentabilidade.

Palavras-chave: *Middle Manager*, *Strategizing*, Sustentabilidade, Estratégia-corno-prática Social, Ensaio Teórico.

La actuación del gerente medio en las interlocuciones entre *strategizing* y sostenibilidad: un ensayo teórico

Propósito del estudio: comprender, a partir de un ensayo teórico, como ocurre la actuación del gestor medio en las interlocuciones entre el hacer estrategia y la sostenibilidad.

Metodología/enfoque: Ensayo teórico basado en el enfoque de una revisión narrativa de la literatura.

Originalidad/Relevancia: Carencia de trabajos que aborden el papel del gestor medio en las interlocuciones entre *strategizing* y la sostenibilidad, tomando la iniciativa relevante para la discusión y ampliación del alcance de la investigación en el campo de la estrategia.

Principales resultados: Argumentos sobre la importancia estratégica de la sostenibilidad en las organizaciones; las distintas formas de actuación del gestor medio en las interlocuciones entre *strategizing* y sostenibilidad; la construcción del sentido para que se legitimen acciones sostenibles; y una representación teórica del papel del gestor medio en las interlocuciones entre *strategizing* y la sostenibilidad.

Aportes teóricos/metodológicos: este estudio destaca la necesidad de promover acciones sostenibles de manera práctica en las organizaciones para encontrar un estado de sinergia entre organización y entorno, siendo el mando medio un actor importante en el proceso de creación de sentido para las estrategias enfocadas en la sostenibilidad.

Aportes sociales / de gestión: Este estudio reveló que, en el ejercicio de sus roles (facilitador, implementador, defensor y sintetizador) y al asumir una postura orientada hacia estrategias sostenibles, los mandos intermedios reciben una nueva atribución, la de promover estrategias de sostenibilidad dentro de la organización.

Palabras clave: Gestor medio, *Strategizing*, Sostenibilidad, Estrategia-corno-Práctica Social, Ensaio Teórico.

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Introduction

In the editorial Strategy and organization scholarship through a radical sustainability lens: A call for 5.0, Jarzabkowski, Dowell, and Berchicci (2021) highlight the eminent need to investigate sustainability as a topic of practical strategy within organizations. This need is ratified by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN, 2021) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) as well as by the study of Zanoni & Oliveira (2023) that brings considerations about the meaning of sustainability as a legitimizing factor of organizations.

O principal argumento para sustentar a necessidade de estratégias como práticas de The main argument to support the need for strategies such as sustainability practices is based on the complexity of uncertainties that emerge in unsustainable environments and that can completely alter future realities, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic that, unpredictably, generated an emerging need for change in habits, concepts and daily practices to meet the restrictions arising from health measures of social isolation and that deeply affected interpersonal, work, social and family relationships and the economy (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021).

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic created the need for change, the lack of sustainability practices can generate other emerging global risks related to climate and the environment, as presented in the Global Risks Report (WEF, 2022). These changes may cause strategic plans to simply lose meaning because they are no longer aligned with the reality to which they were originally architected. These considerations reinforce the need to rethink sustainability as a means of survival and of generating quality of life and, consequently, to think of sustainability as a strategic necessity for organizations (Jarzabkowski, Dowell & Berchicci, 2021; Machado et al., 2011).

In the social context, organizations have an important role to play regarding sustainability practices as they are in constant exchange with the environment, and the product of these exchanges can define the survival of the organization and/or the preservation of the environment that surrounds it, due to the complex dynamics inherent to an interdependent social-ecological system (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021). In this dynamic, from the strategizing lens, several elements need to be considered in the defining and implementation of strategy, as well as several agents involved in these processes need to be committed to the decision-making process and the strategic making, among which we highlight, in this study, the middle manager (Floyd, & Lane, 2000; Balogun, & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Mantere, 2008; Lavarda et al., 2010; Splitter, Jarzabkowski, & Seidl, 2021).

In the literature on the subject, there are discussions about who performs the function of the *middle manager*, the roles of the *middle manager* in the context of *strategizing*, or even how this actor articulates the strategies within organizations (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Huy, 2011; Rouleau, & Balogun, 2011; Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021), however, there is still a gap to be filled concerning the role of the *middle manager* in the strategic making with an orientation towards sustainability.

The focus of studies on strategizing in organizations has still been directed towards organizational efficiency, and issues related to sustainability remain in the background, despite their importance for the continuity of their own operations and the construction of a sustainable environment. This topic is relevant when seeking the continuity of organizational activities with minimal negative impact on the environment and people's lives. The middle manager plays a crucial role in the dynamics of strategy formation within organizations. This finding is supported by the low number of academic publications identified during the preliminary narrative literature review conducted in this study. This review, in turn, was one of the main factors that reinforce the need to undertake this theoretical essay

From the perspective of strategy as a practice (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski, Seidl, & Balogun, 2022), which emphasizes the relevance of the agent or practitioner in the strategic process; given the call for studies on sustainability and strategy practices (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021) and the demand for sustainability strategies (ONU, 2021; OCDE, 2021) om a practical point of view in organizations, we reached the study question: *how does the middle manager act in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability?*

Although, there may be several approaches for the treatment of the study question, this work, eminently theoretical (Whetten, 2003), has a focus on the role of the middle manager (Floyd, & Wooldridge, 1992, 2017); on the importance of the *organizational posture towards sustainability* (Machado et al., 2011; Ceni, & Rese, 2020; ONU, 2021, OCDE, 2021) and on addressing concepts of strategy as practice (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Golsorkhi et al., 2010), emphasizing the interlocution between *strategizing* and sustainability.

To answer the research question, this work aimed to understand, from a theoretical essay, how the middle manager operates in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability.

We searched the literature for elements that could provide the subsidies for a theoretical essay on the role of the middle manager in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability, having as theoretical assumptions that: (i) the middle manager acts in different ways in the strategy as a sustainability practice; (ii) sustainability is a strategic need for organizations; furthermore (iii) the interlocution between strategizing and sustainability can be intensified by the meaning of the actions legitimized by the middle manager.

Thus, discussing strategy and sustainability is relevant in organizational studies, since the object of study, organizations, are not separate from the environment in which they are constituted, showing the interdependence between what is done in the organization, the reflection in the environment, and what the environment makes available so that the organization can perform its activities. In this manner, evidencing practices, praxis and practitioners of the strategies can contribute to the development of sustainability actions.

This work was structured in five parts: introduction; methodological approach; presentation and discussion of results, followed by the final considerations.

Methodological approach

Although a theoretical essay does not require the establishment and presentation of a method (Moreno et al., 2016; Rocha et al., 2022), we will now describe how we proceeded to develop this study. To achieve the proposed goal, we previously followed the approach of a narrative literature review (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006), which allows greater flexibility in establishing the selection criteria of the bibliographies and articles selected, allowing the consolidation of a *corpus* of analysis directed to the object of study, besides being a methodology widely used to advance knowledge in the field of strategy (Rajagopalan, & Spreitzer, 1997; Langley, 1999, 2007; Jarzabkowski, & Spee, 2009; Vaz, & Bulgacov, 2018; Rossi et al., 2020). In this study, we pursued the approach based on five steps, (i) identification of the theme, the definition of the research question and definition of keywords; (ii) establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria; (iii) identification of pre-selected, selected studies; (iv) listing of pre-selected studies and complementation of bibliographies; and (v) analysis, interpretation, synthesis and presentation of the results, Figure 1

Figure 1

Steps used based on a narrative review

Etapa	Atividades realizadas	Produtos das atividades
1 st	Identificação do tema, definição da questão de pesquisa e das palavras-chave	Search string “ <i>strategizing</i> ” AND “ <i>sustainability</i> ”; <i>Scopus</i> and <i>Web of Science</i> databases
2 nd	Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria	Scientific articles; open access; no language restriction and no time cut
3 rd	Identification of pre-selected and selected studies	Removal of duplicates and selection of those that addressed the role of the middle manager in sustainability strategies
4 th	Categorizing the selected studies	Listagem dos artigos pré-selecionados
5 th	Analysis, interpretation, presentation and synthesis of results	Levantamento de constructos teóricos utilizados nos artigos em análise (estudos teóricos) e análise da atuação do <i>middle manager</i> em estratégia como prática de sustentabilidade.

Note: survey data

In the first phase, and after defining the theme of the *middle manager's* role in the interlocutions between *strategizing* and sustainability, the search string “*strategizing*” AND “*sustainability*” was defined. As a reference base for the search, we selected the *Web of Science* and *Scopus*, as they are consolidated, consistent and constantly updated bases. The return was 62 articles in the *Web of Science* and 61 articles in the *Scopus* reference base, totaling 123 articles.

In the second phase, after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria (scientific articles included; open access; no time cut; no language restriction) 37 articles remained in the *Web of Science* and 24 in *Scopus*, totalling 61 articles.

In the third phase, 22 articles were removed for being duplicates. Thus, the remaining 39 articles were submitted to a preliminary analysis so as to identify, by reading their abstracts, those that dealt with the role of the middle manager. As such, the study proceeded with only four articles that contained elements that could contribute to the investigation of the middle manager's role in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability.

The fourth phase consisted of listing the references, being: Darabpout et al. (2018), Andersen and Esbjerg (2020), Reynolds and Holt (2021), and Luederitz et al. (2021). Due to the restricted number of remaining articles, five articles that had not appeared in the initial search were included, which were known to the authors and which met the same criteria as the narrative review search, to complement the set of articles for the literature review, being: Machado et al. (2011), Welzel & Lavarda (2016), Imperador e Silva (2018), Ceni and Rese (2020) and Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci (2021).

In the fifth phase, we present the results of the study, highlighting the connections between the *middle manager*, *strategizing*, sustainability, and the assumptions of this study, as well as the construction of a representative framework of the middle manager's role in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability.

Presentation and Discussion of Results

We will briefly present the contributions of each article, going through a review of the main themes (*middle manager*, *strategizing*, sustainability), followed by the discussion of the results and, finally, the final considerations of this paper.

The Role of the Middle Manager

Middle manager, versed to Portuguese means the intermediary manager or manager of the Middle management, does not only refer to the managers formally established by the organizational structure, but from the perspective of strategy as practice (Whittington, 2006), these practitioners of strategy are assumed as leaders within the organizations, Their main characteristic is that they are responsible for articulating the strategic processes between the management and the operational areas (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014).

According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), during the formulation and implementation of the strategy, the *middle manager* may act in different roles to perform the articulation between the levels, with emphasis on the roles of (i) advocate, (ii) synthesizer, (iii) facilitator, and (iv) implementer. As a *defender of alternatives*, the *middle manager* focuses on guiding the necessary actions for the achievement of the organizational objectives proposed by the top management while defending,

whenever possible, the interests of groups that do not participate in the formulation of the strategy (Floyd, & Wooldridge, 1992).

In the role of *information synthesizer*, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) state that the *middle manager* focuses on understanding the top management's proposals and on synthesizing ideas to facilitate the information "translation" process for the various levels of the organization.

As a *facilitator of adaptation*, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) emphasize the importance of this strategy practitioner in sharing information and, when necessary, in promoting the adaptation of this information to facilitate organizational learning. When acting as a *strategy implementer*, this actor focuses on the responsibility for implementing strategies, adjusting and motivating those involved to achieve the objectives (Floyd, & Wooldridge, 1992; 2017).

By performing these roles, the *middle manager* becomes an articulator and a fundamental piece for the strategy to occur in the organizations, evidencing its importance in the strategy materialization (Bencherki et al., 2021). Some studies, resulting from the literature review, present the performance and the context in which *middle managers* were fundamental for the practice of the sustainability-oriented strategy.

Darabpour et al. (2018) conduct a qualitative study in order to present steps to be followed for sustainable construction in Iran. Although the *middle manager's* role is not explicit in their work, Darabpour et al. (2018) mention that to fully meet sustainability requirements, it is important to have cooperation between the agents responsible for sustainability strategies (the legislative agents, managers, engineers, and stakeholders) to unify their objectives and carry out a survey of the internal and external factors that provide sustainability (in the specific case, of the construction industry) through five dimensions: Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental, or, *Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal e Environmental* (PESTLE) (Darabpouret al. 2018).

As for Andersen and Esbjerg (2020), they studied strategies of multinationals oriented to markets at the *base of the economic pyramid* (BoP), with a focus on social responsibility and sustainability. Andersen and Esbjerg (2020), on the other hand, studied the strategies of multinationals aimed toward markets at the *base of the economic pyramid* (BoP), with a focus on social responsibility and sustainability. Andersen and Esbjerg (2020) presented the results of their study on the strategy of a Danish Multinational that established a local operations team (in Kenya) to carry out, together with the development sector (in Denmark), the supply of treated water to African villages, seeking alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (Andersen & Esbjerg, 2020).

According to Andersen and Esbjerg (2020), the new business development sector was responsible for providing the formal support (formulated strategy) while the seconded team, through its local managers, carried out the strategic learning with the actions carried out *in loco* and *in vivo*. As a result of this combined formation of deliberate and emerging strategy, various changes have been made to improve and adapt the strategies formulated to the local reality, mentioning the main results: the need to involve the communities in the formation of strategy; to know the environment in which one is seeking

to establish a business; that the imposition of business activities in complex environments must be equipped with the capacity for flexibility to support the actions of the local context (social, environmental and economic).

The role of the *middle manager* in this study was evidenced by the formulation of the new business strategy focused on sustainability and the flexibility of the strategy by absorbing information from the local context (Andersen and Esbjerg, 2020), while other *middle managers* from the selected team entered the local context gathering information and contributing to the learning of the strategy.

Luederitz et al. (2021) conducted a study in two organizations, a family brewery and a cooperative of beer producers seeking to identify how small businesses seek sustainability. Luederitz et al (2021) identified groups of actions performed by these organizations that pursue sustainability strategies, being: (i) group of actions related to planning; (ii) group of collective actions; (iii) group of emerging actions. Within these three groups, they concluded that the actions of the individual (isolated or in a group) can shape the planned or emerging strategies, and in small organizations, the expertise and experience of the strategy intermediaries are fundamental for the generation of trust and the adoption of strategies focused on sustainability; moreover, Luederitz et al. (2021) cite that addressing sustainability-oriented strategies in a collective and distributed manner is positive in the small business context..

Strategy as a Social Practice: *Strategizing*

The *middle manager's* role takes on greater importance when the theoretical lens of *Strategizing* is used, making the strategy, or the strategic doing, or even strategy as a social practice, which is an approach to strategy about strategic micro-processes in which the practices, praxis, and practitioners of the strategy are observed (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007).

Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl (2007) point out that: the strategy practices refer to that which is being executed within the organization and which has some strategic value; the praxis, in turn, encompasses how the activities are executed, or even, how the practices are performed; the strategy practitioners, on the other hand, are the people who make up the organization or even those who, despite not being (internal) members of the organization, have a relation with its strategic activities.

The intersection between practices, praxis, and practitioners of strategy, has been termed *strategizing* (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Balogun, 2019). The field of study of *strategizing* comprehends the relations arising from the dimensions of practices, praxis, and practitioners, such as the dynamics (cause and effect) that occur during social practices within the organization, for example, the roles and actors involved in the practice of strategies (Lavarda et al., 2010); the process of opening of strategy (Splitter, Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2021; Bellucci et al., 2023); material artifacts related to the practice of strategy,

such as the organizational structure (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Balogun, 2019); and, immaterial artifacts, such as *sensemaking* (Rouleau, 2005).

Strategy within organizations has the function of sustaining or jeopardizing the organization's survival (Moore, 2000). The strategy practices can define the organizational posture towards key issues related to sustainability (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci (2021), moreover, through the practices (and their praxis) it is also possible to identify the posture of individuals who are members of the organizations when facing issues involving environmental sustainability (Ceni, & Rese, 2020; Reynolds, & Holt, 2021).

One of the attitudes through which the organization can contribute to foster sustainability strategies to be followed or encouraged, occurs through deliberate strategies, which are incorporated into the organizational structure from different models or strategic tools (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Although, autonomous actions may demonstrate their stance by employing emerging strategies that become equally incorporated into the organization's strategy (Roch et al., 2022).

Strategy and Sustainable Development

Organizations have an interdependent relationship with the environment (Donaldson, 1999), a relationship that is consummated by exchanges of inputs and outputs. Inputs consist of resources required for production and outputs consist of products or waste arising from the processing of resources to carry out the organization's main activity. In order to maintain this exchange relationship sustainably, some organizations seek ways (deliberate strategies) to have the least possible impact on the environment, without necessarily harming productivity which is fundamental for the survival of the organization (Moore, 2000).

At this stage, sustainability strategy models emerge, which seek to evaluate/measure/implement these strategies in organizations with the intention of balancing the productive organizational structure to the needs arising from sustainability.

The first model identified in the review was Structure-Conduct-Performance (SCP) presented by Machado et al. (2011), which has a focus on the evaluation of environmental strategies. We verified, preliminarily, that this model is supported by a theoretical framework that mentions six ways of how an organization can manage environmental issues, which can be based (i) on tricks (escape from responsibilities and inspection); (ii) on responses (responses to incidents and regulations that it becomes aware of; (iii) on compliance (respond to strictly legal issues with compliance programs; (iv) environmental management (systematic management of environmental issues, integrated into the overall administration); (v) concern with pollution (reflecting on all actions with concern for the environment); and (vi) sustainable development (the organization is concerned with the social, environmental and economic impact of its actions).

In this study Machado et al. (2011) also present profiles of environmental conduct: weak (omission in the face of environmental responsibilities); strong (is concerned about the environment and

has organizational structure designed for this activity); and, intermediate (is inserted between the two profiles). These profiles are the sum of the behaviors of the sectors that make up the organization, in accordance with the components that must be identified in the management assessment process of the organizational environmental strategy.

Welzel and Lavarda (2016), in turn, present the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) model, that aims to implement social responsibility strategies, a model in which sustainability is inserted. In their study Welzel e Lavarda (2016) made a correlation between the concepts of CSR and strategizing pointing out that there is a point of convergence between their elements when analyzed at the time of execution or implementation of strategic decisions, being that: (i) the main categories of CSR 'best practices' are (equivalent or) translated by the practices; (ii) the implementation phases of CSR correspond or are translated by praxis and (iii) the implementers of CSR are the professional practitioners of the strategy in practice (who need to have their professional profile as implementers of these activities studied in detail).

According to Welzel & Lavarda (2016), intersections arise from the relationship between practice and practitioners (which consolidate the know-how of those involved); practices and their praxis (which reflect on the perspective and meaning of the practices and how they are executed); and practitioners with their praxis, which reflects on the management of the organizational structure to the execution of strategic tasks.

Imperador and Silva (2018), in turn, bring contributions to corporate sustainable development measurement systems ("SDMS"), highlighting that the basis for any measurement system, are the sustainability indicators. The indicators refer to a set of signals that facilitate the evaluation of the progress of a given company in the pursuit of sustainable development, being "crucial tools in the process of problem identification, problem recognition, policy formulation, its implementation, and evaluation". (Imperador, & Silva, 2018, p.434).

According to Imperador and Silva (2018), it was possible to present a comparative analysis of the main SDMS, citing: ABNT NBR ISO 26,000:2010 - Guidelines on Social Responsibility; Corporate Sustainability Index (ISE-BM&F-BOVESPA); Ethos Indicators; Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI); Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Within the environmental dimension, Imperador and Silva (2018) report that only about 24% of the themes and sub-themes are convergent in the different SDMS, and the themes *Energy Consumed within the Organization and Total Water Extracted*, common to the five systems, being, also: *Water, Energy, Waste, GHG and Biodiversity*, priority themes for the business area.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD (2021), the term "sustainable development" came into popular use after the publication of the Brundtland report entitled "Our Common Future" in the late 1980s. During that time, the need for urgent changes in people's way of life and government actions in pursuit of sustainability strategies to achieve development was already highlighted, asserting that sustainability is grounded in three interconnected

pillars: society, economy, and environment. This report presented the concept of sustainable development, which is to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to secure the resources to meet their needs (United Nations, 1980).

As a way to provide a guide for the implementation of sustainability, the United Nations Organization (UN, 2021) expresses its concern with the creation of international agendas. The first agenda listed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), composed of eight goals, sought to present developing countries with a guide for sustainability, and, due to its success, as of 2015, the MDGs were replaced by the 2030 Agenda, which presents the Goals for Sustainable Development aimed at:

end poverty, protect the environment and the climate, and ensure that people everywhere can enjoy peace and prosperity. These are the goals to which the United Nations is contributing so that we can achieve the 2030 Agenda in Brazil (UN, 2021, n.p).

Despite the extensive coverage of the specific areas and objectives which the theme of sustainability can encompass, this study focused on the three overarching dimensions of sustainability mentioned by the OECD (2021): economy, society, and environment.

In this context, on the one hand, sustainable development in the triad of economy, society, and environment can influence organizational performance and structure. On the other hand, the unidimensional pursuit of goals, predominantly economic, can negatively impact the environment and society, as organizations are embedded in a socio-ecological environment with limited resources and regenerative capacity. (Jarzabkowski, Dowell & Berchicci, 2021).

This paradox between the three dimensions which don't seem to converge needs to be addressed by a responsible perspective that, according to Jarzabkowski, Dowell, and Berchicci (2021), requires a radical change in mentality about the concept of development and progress, which was built upon essentially economic elements. According to Jarzabkowski, Dowell, and Berchicci (2021), the next phase of the 5.0 society revolution should be directed towards sustainability and the formation of leaders who build senses for strategic doing in a practical way in organizations based on sustainability practices.

In this context, we highlight the importance of the strategy agent (middle manager) in the construction of the meaning of sustainability actions (Jarzabkowski, Dowell & Berchicci, 2021), since it is through the organizations that the active subjects in their communities influence the environment in which they are inserted in an attempt to preserve elements such as tradition and culture, in parallel with the search for development (Donaldson, 1999; Rocha et al., 2022).

Discussions of the Results

Based on the review of the topics in the papers found, we now present some reflections guided by the research question: How does the middle manager's role unfold in the interconnections between strategizing and sustainability? Additionally, these reflections are guided by the three initial theoretical assumptions: (i) the middle manager operates in different ways in sustainability as a strategic practice;

(ii) sustainability represents a strategic necessity for organizations; and (iii) the interplay between strategizing and sustainability can be intensified by the sense of actions legitimized by the middle manager.

The role of the middle manager in the interlocutions between Strategizing and Sustainability

Sustainability within organizations can be considered a cross-cutting theme (Machado et al, 2011; Welzel & Lavarda, 2016; Imperador & Silva, 2018; Ceni & Rese, 2020; Jarzabkowski, Dowell & Berchicci, 2021) and of growing demand, since it can be reflected in the practices/ practices of its members, the working conditions provided to their employees, the decisions of the leadership regarding the care for the environment, the sustainable products and services they provide and, among other ways, the meaning that organizations symbolically represent before society, through the social legitimization of their narratives (Andersen & Esbjerg, 2020; Darabpour et al., 2018; Luederitz et al., 2021; Reynolds & Holt, 2021).

Regardless of how they are represented, sustainability strategies need meaning to occur (Reynolds, & Holt, 2021), even if the goal of organizational survival (Moore, 2000) and people's well-being (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021) seems obvious to stakeholders (Machado et al., 2011). Some strategic actions of the intermediate leadership in the process of making the strategy sustainable can be considered, in Figure 2.

In Figure 2, it is evident that the middle manager (management/manager/intermediate leader) plays a role in various tasks of strategizing in organizations when they opt for sustainability strategies. This includes opening up the strategy and giving meaning to actions in crisis management (Rouleau, 2005; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2017; Ceni & Rese, 2020), as well as in the implementation, monitoring, and execution of strategies focusing on corporate social responsibility (Welzel & Lavarda, 2016). The middle manager also participates in the process of evaluating the conduct of sustainable strategies (Machado et al., 2011) and holds responsibility for implementing the organization's sustainability management and development systems (SMDS) (Imperador, & Silva, 2018).

Figure 2

Strategic actions by middle managers mentioned in sustainability-related articles

Actions by middle managers in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability	Authors
In the <i>implementation, execution and management of strategic sustainability activities</i> in the organization; the company has a person responsible for environmental management	(Machado et al., 2011)
In the <i>monitoring and implementation of the strategies</i> and are also able to <i>interfere in the process with the experiences that have been lived through</i> , whether positive or negative.	(Welzel & Lavarda (2016)
In the <i>implementation and management of sustainable development measurement systems</i> , seeking corporate sustainability.	(Imperador, & Silva, 2018)
In decision-making and influencing organizational strategies: for example, <i>the actions of managers towards sustainability with the choice of directors</i> .	(Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021).
In the <i>strategic practice of sensegiving</i> inherent in post-disaster <i>strategizing</i> ; and participation in the strategy opening process	(Ceni, & Rese, 2020)
In the <i>strategic deliberation and learning activities</i> carried out by the heads of department and those responsible for the operational team.	(Andersen, & Esbjerg, 2020)
In the search for cooperation between strategic actors (legislators, engineers, and managers) for the <i>alignment of objectives based on sustainability</i>	(Darabpout et al., 2018)
Sensemaking of <i>self and organizational sensemaking</i> , fundamental to managing the tension between altruism and ambition in the context of hybrid organizations	(Reynolds, & Holt, 2021)
In the <i>individual or collective action with the power to change the strategic planning or the emerging one by carrying out planned tasks, collective and/or emerging actions</i>	(Luederitz et al., 2021)

Note: survey data

The middle manager participates integrally in sustainability strategies (implementation-execution-measurement-evaluation) and even in crisis management when these strategies do not go as planned (as happened in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic).

The broad scope of the *middle manager's* actions within the organizational context and in the strategy phases makes it possible to claim that this actor has the potential to be a fundamental promoter of sustainability-oriented strategies. However, this depends on the training profile of this leadership, to which Jarzabkowski, Dowell, and Berchicci (2021) highlight the need to qualify leaders who know how to manage the co-evolutionary development of the economic, social and environmental dimensions so that the sustainability balance is achieved. Besides this, the middle manager has been the subject of attention in organizations and in the literature (Azambuja, Islam, & Ancelin, 2022) and, in order to conduct this process, he/she needs to conquer this space with sustainable, convincing, and conciliatory practices among the different *stakeholders*.

Sustainability as a Strategic Need

The finite nature of natural resources, the pursuit of social welfare, and the goal of progressively improving global resource efficiency in consumption and production by 2030 and striving to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, according to the Ten-Year Plan of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production, highlight how strategic the issue of sustainability in organizations is, thus, seeking the coevolution of the three dimensions in sustainable development (economy, society, and environment) (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021; OECD, 2021), and its various ramifications in specific sustainability goals (UN, 2021), is fundamental at multilevel (macro and micro).

One of the definitions for sustainability found in the literature refers to the balanced relationship between dynamic economic systems and ecological systems where impacts on the environment are minimized or slower than the changes occurring at strategic organizational levels (UN, 2021). Within this context, organizations need to build a network of partnerships to strengthen the means of implementation (strategies) and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (OCDE, 2021).

Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci (2021) mention the ecological adaptation theory, in which organizations are connected in a dynamic biophysical world in which changes at any time scale can influence other changes, like a cascading effect. Starting from this principle, we understand that sustainability or the lack of sustainability actions can occur in the same direction, that is, actions that create changes in the environment can influence (motivate) sustainability actions of other organizations, as a cascading effect and negative actions regarding sustainability can influence other negative actions.

Considering that organizations have a major responsibility to ensure that the global partnership for sustainable development is strengthened and composed of multisectoral partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development objectives in all countries, particularly in developing countries (UN, 2021); consequently, the actions of organizations can influence changes in the environment, and these changes in the environment can exercise influence on the organization itself and its surroundings (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021).

Given this contextualization, the strategy focused on the competitive advantage at any cost, needs to make room for those that contemplate the maintenance of resources so that organizational activities can occur in the future. The water must be clean, the air breathable, nature preserved, people's well-being and rights preserved, and yet organizations must be able to stay economically healthy.

It is not a simple task and demands studies, work, and actions. However, due to the importance that sustainability has when observed from the perspective of social-ecological theory, sustainability can be considered a strategic need for organizations, both for organizational survival, as well as for economic, social and environmental issues in the long term.

Intensifying the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability in the actions legitimized by the middle manager

Sustainable strategizing, or the practical strategies for sustainability, needs a greater meaning so that it is possible to break with the paradigm of strategy focusing predominantly on the economic dimension, to the detriment of other dimensions (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021). When observed from the perspective of *strategizing*, the meaning built for the strategies is studied through *sensemaking* (Rouleau, 2005; Floyd, & Wooldridge, 2017). Hence, if there is a meaning (a legitimate reason) for actions through sustainability strategies, the prospect of profit and the continuous search for market competitiveness at any cost can give way to a co-evolutionary process, in which progress is accompanied by sustainability strategies (Reynolds, & Holt, 2021), and also accompanied by ethical issues (Ceni, & Rese, 2020).

Reynolds and Holt (2021) point out that *sensemaking* can occur in a preliminary phase starting from the individual through the "*sensemaking of self*" and, from this, go through the actions of the organization in other individuals and sectors. Ceni and Rese (2020) help to better define the conception of the senses' terminologies stating that the construction of meaning is inherent to the performance of the practitioner who seeks to act and propose solutions in emerging situations, thus, the meaning after created (*sensemaking*) can be disseminated in the organization (*sensegiving*). According to Ceni and Rese (2020), "sensegiving is constituted as a prominent strategic practice in the *strategizing* of organizations in crisis; and narratives figure as a performative resource for the stability and change of these organizations" (Ceni & Rese, 2020, p.286).

In this dynamic, and when the meaning to be created and shared involves sustainability, Reynolds, and Holt (2021) mention the existence of tensions generated between the altruism of the search for a socio-environmental organization above profit and the ambition to achieve a self-financing and sustainable business.

When the created and shared sense is accepted by the collectivity in the organization, *sensemaking* is able to shape the actions of the organizations, because it may be from this that a greater purpose is presented to the components of the organizations. A purpose greater than daily activities, sales, and production, in short, if *sensemaking* can build a purpose based on issues related to sustainability there will be at this point an intensification in the interlocution between *strategizing* and sustainability (Schildt, Mantere, & Comelissen, 2020).

However, for this to be possible, it is necessary that leaders at each level act with *sensemaking* (Ceni, & Rese, 2020) focusing on development with organizational and environmental sustainability to find practical strategies (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021) to combine economic growth with minimal negative consequences for the environment and society (UN, 2021; OECD, 2021).

Thus, it is increasingly important that leaders at all levels, in particular the middle manager, because it is the scope of this work, seek to carry out their organizational strategies focusing on sustainability actions in synergy with the environment (Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021), so

that future generations can continue to enjoy the resources we have available today (OCDE, 2021; ONU, 2021).

As a way to illustrate the dynamics of the interlocution between *strategizing* and sustainability, as well as the *middle manager's* performance through his/her actions in this inter-relationship, we present in the next item an illustration that places the *middle manager*, his/her performance in the practice of strategy (strategizing) and his/her responsibility concerning the creation of meaning in the actions directed towards sustainability so that the interlocution between the practices of strategy and sustainability is intensified.

A representative framework of the middle manager's role in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability

Seeking to explore connections within this study, we elaborated a representation from the interlocution between the studies of Machado et al., (2011) (through the components of environmental management; environmental conduct; and environmental conduct profile); Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci (2021) (social-ecological systems and their reflexive interactions); and the findings concerning practices, praxis, strategy practitioners, and sensemaking/sensegiving (Welzel & Lavarda, 2016; Ceni, & Rese, 2020; Jarzabkowski, Dowell, & Berchicci, 2021); reaching a proposed representation of the elements that express the *middle manager's* performance in the interlocutions between *strategizing* and sustainability.

For the description of the representation contained in Figure 3, we start from the center outwards in a clockwise direction. . It is important to note that in the real world, this representation is dynamic and the actions described here can occur at the same time.

In the center of the representation, we project the components (practice, praxis and practitioners), where the sustainability strategizing is materialized, which refers to the posture of the organization's strategic doing, focused on sustainability. In the center of the image, there is also the figure of the *middle manager*, performing the articulations of the *strategizing* through his/her functions (facilitating, implementing, defending, and synthesizing the actions focused on sustainability) and constructing/sharing the meaning of the sustainability-oriented actions.

This focus on sustainability can be intensified by the meaning that is constructed and given to the actions, that is, the actions are legitimized by the purpose of the strategic need for sustainability in the organization, which can occur through the middle manager's sensemaking. Therefore, the arrows that go from the center to the outside of Figure 3 represent the energies (efforts) generated by the performance and sensemaking of the middle manager, efforts that can take the form of narratives in favor or of sustainability actions.

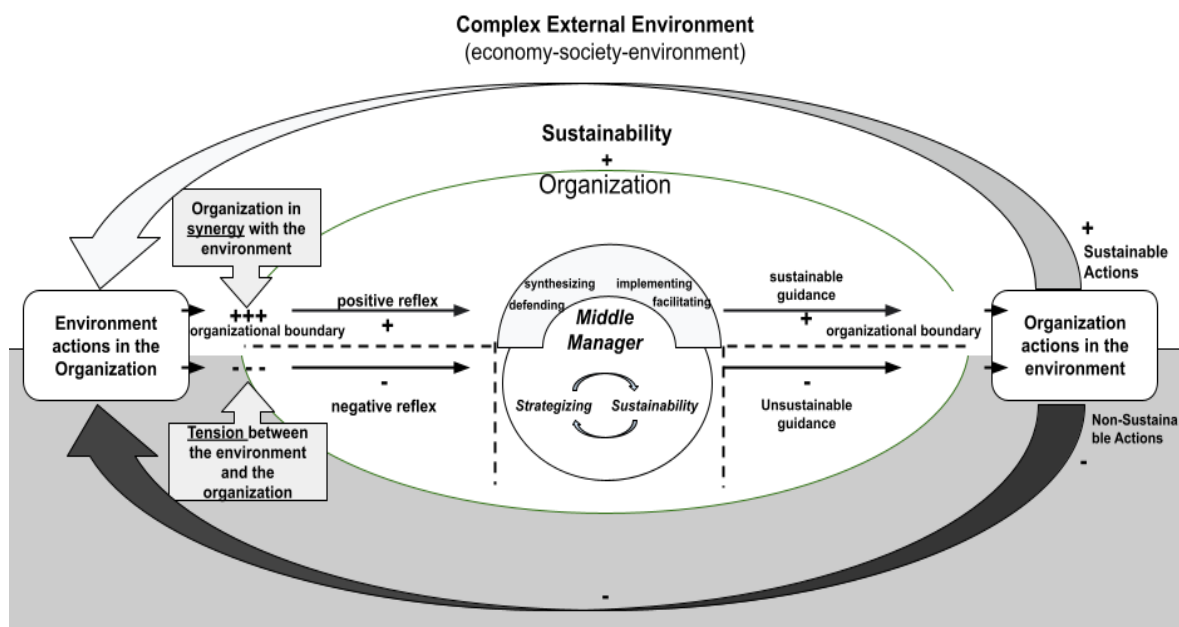
As the internal structure of the organization represented in Figure 3 was built with elements of sustainable development and representing an organization with a *sustainable approach*, the sensemaking generated within the organization by the middle manager generates energy with positive

polarity (+), that is, efforts that foster a purpose to sustainability actions. However, the organization might not adopt sustainability practices in its strategies, and the negative reflexes of its actions could affect the environment and the organization itself. Regardless of the polarity, the central issue is that the organization is not isolated from its environment, the energy generated within the organization surpasses the organizational boundary, influences the environment and is exposed to the reflections of its actions on the environment.

To better explain this dynamic, to the right of Figure 3 is the organizational boundary, which represents the outlet of the energies generated in the organization. When passing into the external environment, these energies (positive, represented by the white arrow and the positive (+) sign, and negative, represented by the dark arrow and the negative (-) sign) can cause a cascading effect for those who interrelate with the organization or with the surrounding environment. Although it is representing only one organization, it is necessary to take into account the environmental complexity in which various organizations and contexts interrelate in and with the environment.

Figure 3

A representative framework of the middle manager's role in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability



Note. The positive sign (+) represents that the *middle manager's* performance from the perspective of sustainability-oriented *strategizing* may generate synergy between the organization and the environment, with sensemaking being fundamental to legitimize strategy orientation. The negative sign (-) represents that the *middle manager's* actions not focused on sustainability may generate tensions between the organization and the environment considering the negative reflection that actions not focused on sustainability may generate for the organization.

As a result, starting from positive internal stimuli in the organization (white arrow), it emanates *positive energy into the environment*, thus, if the organization's actions are sustainable, they tend to create a sustainable environment, hence, the organization, within its limitations, acts actively concerning developing itself amid sustainability, because the organization seeks to shape the environment to be sustainable and its actions generate positive reflexes for the organization itself. This last phase is represented by the positive energy entering the organizational boundary (on the left side of Figure 1), generating synergy between the organization and the environment.

However, if we started from *negative internal stimuli* in the organization (dark arrow), the organization would emanate negative energy to the external environment, through its unsustainable actions, and could generate an *unsustainable environment*, which would reflect the negative energy to the organization itself (left organizational boundary, dark arrow). In this situation, the organization acts passively in relation to the sustainability of the environment, that is, it does not seek to create a sustainable environment, but waits for environmental problems or government (or society) inspections to occur to take the necessary measures for its survival. Thus, organizations tend to use tricks and justifications for their *unsustainable actions*.

The innovation in this representation is in the insertion of organizational boundaries and the reflexive relations between the organization and the socio-ecological and co-evolving system of the society-environment-economy, an opportunity that enables the first steps towards the representation of *strategizing* and its external relations through its sustainability-based organizational boundaries.

In short, we understand that there may emerge an *atmosphere of sustainability* or *unsustainability* (depending on the organizational strategy) that permeates the surroundings of the organization, influencing the environment and other organizations. In the real world, this dynamic is even more complex, for thousands of organizations and billions of people act daily according to their convictions, desires, and cognitive limitations, and the action of each one influences the environment, not necessarily aligned with sustainability.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we aimed to understand, from a theoretical essay, how the middle manager operates in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability.

We developed a representative framework of the middle manager's role and his/her importance in the intensification of the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability (Figure 3) through the creation of sustainability-oriented meaning, contextualized in a co-evolving social-ecological system in which the exchange relationship between the organization and the environment (inputs and outputs) was evidenced in the face of the stances taken by organizations concerning sustainability.

As a theoretical contribution, this study has evidenced that, in the execution of their roles (facilitator, implementer, advocate and synthesizer) and when assuming a posture oriented to practical sustainability strategies, the middle manager receives a new assignment, that of promoting sustainability

strategies and actions within the organization. . In this sense, it was possible to evidence that the *middle manager's* orientation towards sustainability can influence the ways of environmental management and the *sensemaking* dynamics adopted in the organizations.

We understand that this essay signals and contributes to studies that seek to verify the expansion of the middle manager's role as a promoter of sustainability in the organization, either through sensemaking or through his strategic practices focused on sustainability. Therefore, in studies about strategizing, this work aggregates to the middle manager the responsibility of promoting sustainability in organizations, adding to the theme, the importance of creating meaning (sensemaking) to legitimize sustainability-oriented strategies.

We also highlight the evidence of the relationship between the discourses of sensemaking and the environmental management of the organization, which can be considered a sustainability strategy, with the following logic being established: strong environmental management tends to generate a sustainable environment, consequently, there are internal stimuli in the organization to operate in an active way, generating a discourse of improvement of the sustainability practices (sensemaking). In contrast, one inefficient environmental management tends to produce an unsustainable environment (with negative sustainability practices), consequently, there are external stimuli to present responses to the demands of society concerning sustainability strategies, leaving the organization with less ability to anticipate crises and environmental disasters, generating narratives of strategic changes (Ceni, & Rese, 2020).

As a practical contribution, we highlight that this work serves as a call to discuss the theme of *organizational sustainability* within the perspective of strategy as social practice (Zanoni & Oliveira, 2023). More specifically, we present theoretical indications about how the *middle manager* can act in relation to sustainable development in organizations, and how this matter can be evaluated by managers in different sectors. We also emphasize that our study does not exhaust the issues of how sustainability strategies occur in practice, but only indicates the primacy with which the theme should be treated.

The main limitation inherent in this theoretical essay stems from small portfolio of scientific articles analyzed, as well as the use of secondary data as a source, which is justified since it is not our intention to conduct a survey on the state of the art of the subject, but rather, to present motivating elements, new perspectives and insights on a theme that is still little addressed within studies on strategizing and its social practices.

Another limitation comes from the diversity of terms with which the authors of the portfolio under analysis used to refer to sustainability strategies in organizations (sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable strategy, organizational sustainability, environmental management), perhaps the better delimitation of each approach can better elucidate these terms.

However, the limitations instigate and suggest that future research can continue to delve deeper into the topic, since Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci (2021) mention the need to act

surgically with research and discussions focused on strategies that impact in a practical way the promotion of sustainability

As future strands of research, although there is a paradox between the development of the economy and sustainability (Imperador & Silva, 2018), social issues must be worked together (OECD, 2021; UN, 2021), thus, it is opportune that ways are sought for organizations to be able to carry out their strategies, inserting those that contemplate practices towards sustainable development. At this point, there emerges the importance of the *middle manager* and the power of persuasion in the construction of meaning for the actions with the purpose of emphasizing the adoption of strategies that enable sustainable development. Future studies could further explore what the power of sensemaking (Schildt, Mantere, & Comelissen, 2020) is in guiding sustainability strategies.

As future studies, we also suggest the following: a systematic literature review to verify the state of the art on the possible categories related to the theme Middle Manager and Strategizing; Strategies for Sustainability; an integrative review, aiming to verify the connection of this theme with the disciplines of administration and ecology; and, an empirical research in which elements are sought that can test the representative framework of the middle manager's performance in the interlocutions between strategizing and sustainability, with the purpose of identifying new artifacts; new exchange relations between the internal and external environments of organizations); and, additionally, demonstrate how the levels of analysis of the sustainability dimensions should be approached depending on the scope of each research, which can be macro with the economy, environment and society dimensions (OECD, 2021); or micro with the specific UN SDGs (2021).

Perhaps by filling these gaps, it will be attainable to approximate the ideal situation in which organizations contemplate in all their activities strategic sustainability actions, happening in practice, and providing positive sustainability results for all, for the sake of improving organizational life and the planet.

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