



From Leadership to Entrepreneurship in Sustainability: A Systematic Literature Review of Drivers, Outcomes, and Governance Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT. *This study presents a systematic qualitative literature review examining the transition from leadership to entrepreneurship in sustainability, with a focus on key drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms. Drawing on a structured synthesis of peer reviewed articles, the review identifies leadership capabilities such as visionary thinking, ethical orientation, and stakeholder engagement as critical drivers that foster sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives. The findings reveal that sustainability oriented entrepreneurship contributes to enhanced environmental performance, social value creation, and long term organizational resilience. Additionally, governance mechanisms, including regulatory frameworks, institutional support, and corporate governance structures, play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining these transitions. The review also highlights the dynamic interplay between individual leadership attributes and broader institutional contexts in influencing sustainable entrepreneurship outcomes. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by integrating fragmented insights into a comprehensive framework, offering implications for policymakers, practitioners, and future research in sustainability and entrepreneurship.*

Keywords Sustainable leadership; Sustainable entrepreneurship; Governance mechanisms; Environmental performance; Systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

The growing urgency of global environmental and social challenges has intensified the need for transformative approaches to business and governance, positioning sustainability as a central paradigm in contemporary organizational and entrepreneurial discourse. Climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality have compelled firms and institutions to move beyond traditional profit-oriented models toward more responsible and inclusive practices (Schaltegger et al., 2018; Dean & McMullen, 2007). Within this context, the intersection between leadership and entrepreneurship has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in relation to how leadership capabilities foster sustainability oriented entrepreneurial activities. The integration of sustainable leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship represents a critical pathway for addressing complex socio environmental problems while simultaneously generating economic value (Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024).

Sustainable leadership is broadly conceptualized as a leadership approach that promotes long-term value creation by integrating environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and ethical governance into organizational strategies and practices (Avery, 2005; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Unlike traditional leadership models that emphasize short-term performance outcomes, sustainable leadership focuses on systemic thinking,

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stakeholder engagement, and the preservation of natural and social capital (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Ferdig, 2007). Empirical studies demonstrate that sustainable leadership positively influences organizational innovation, environmental performance, and employee engagement, thereby creating a supportive environment for sustainability oriented initiatives (Burawat, 2019; Javed et al., 2021; Fatoki, 2021). Furthermore, sustainable leadership fosters a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration, which is essential for driving sustainable innovation and entrepreneurial activities (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2023). Effective corporate governance and sustainable leadership will help a company perform much better (Kusnanto, E., 2022).

Parallel to this, sustainable entrepreneurship has emerged as a distinct field that focuses on the identification and exploitation of opportunities that generate environmental and social benefits alongside economic returns (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Sustainable entrepreneurs act as change agents who address market failures and institutional voids by developing innovative solutions that reduce environmental degradation and promote social inclusion (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010). Research highlights that sustainable entrepreneurship is driven by a combination of individual motivations, institutional frameworks, and market conditions, including sustainability orientation, entrepreneurial cognition, and access to supportive ecosystems (Abdelnaeim & El-Bassiouny, 2021; Vuorio et al., 2018; Bischoff, 2021). These factors collectively shape the ability of entrepreneurs to recognize and exploit sustainability related opportunities. Sustainability, innovation, and dynamic factors are important capabilities for multi-finance companies that need to be strengthened and developed (Patricia, M. C, 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature on both sustainable leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship, the linkage between these two constructs remains underexplored and fragmented. Existing studies suggest that sustainable leadership plays a pivotal role in enabling sustainable entrepreneurship by shaping organizational values, fostering innovation, and supporting the development of sustainable business models (Suriyankietkaew, 2019; Dai et al., 2022). Leaders influence entrepreneurial behavior by creating an environment that encourages risk taking, experimentation, and the adoption of sustainable practices (Andersén et al., 2020; Aka et al., 2018). Moreover, sustainable leaders act as institutional entrepreneurs who drive change not only within organizations

but also across broader ecosystems by engaging stakeholders and influencing policy frameworks (Gasbarro et al., 2017; Westman et al., 2023). Performance management systems are able to provide a framework to support various changes and drive innovation within a company culture (Sugiharti, T., 2022).

The concept of governance mechanisms further enriches this discussion by highlighting the structures, processes, and institutional arrangements that facilitate the alignment between leadership and entrepreneurship in achieving sustainability outcomes. Governance mechanisms such as stakeholder engagement, regulatory frameworks, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices play a crucial role in shaping sustainable entrepreneurial activities (Anbarasan & Sushil, 2018; Pinkse & Groot, 2015). Effective governance ensures accountability, transparency, and the integration of sustainability into decision making processes, thereby enhancing organizational resilience and long term performance (Jerónimo Silvestre et al., 2018; Valdez-Juárez et al., 2021). In this regard, sustainable leadership is instrumental in designing and implementing governance structures that support sustainable entrepreneurship.

Another important dimension in the leadership entrepreneurship nexus is the role of innovation and knowledge. Sustainable leadership facilitates the development of innovation ecosystems that enable the diffusion of green technologies and sustainable practices (Bakry et al., 2022; Frare & Beuren, 2022). At the same time, sustainable entrepreneurship drives the creation of new markets and business models that contribute to sustainability transitions (Schaltegger et al., 2016). The interplay between leadership and entrepreneurship is therefore characterized by a dynamic co evolution process, where leadership capabilities influence entrepreneurial outcomes, and entrepreneurial activities, in turn, shape leadership practices (Carayannis et al., 2017; Kelley, 2011).

From a broader perspective, the integration of sustainable leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship is closely aligned with the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainable leadership contributes to goals such as decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and gender equality (SDG 5), while sustainable entrepreneurship supports innovation, reduced inequalities, and responsible consumption and production (SDGs 9, 10, and 12) (Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024). This alignment underscores the strategic importance of understanding how leadership and

entrepreneurship can jointly drive sustainable development at both organizational and societal levels.

However, despite the recognized importance of this relationship, several gaps persist in the literature. First, research tends to focus more heavily on sustainable entrepreneurship than on the role of leadership in enabling such activities, resulting in an imbalance in theoretical and empirical insights (Anand et al., 2021; Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024). Second, the mechanisms through which leadership influences entrepreneurial outcomes remain insufficiently understood, particularly in terms of governance structures and contextual factors. Third, there is a lack of integrative frameworks that systematically synthesize the drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms linking sustainable leadership and entrepreneurship.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative systematic literature review approach, which enables a comprehensive and structured synthesis of existing research (Tranfield et al., 2003; Moher et al., 2009). By systematically analyzing prior studies, this research aims to identify the key drivers that facilitate the transition from leadership to entrepreneurship in sustainability, examine the outcomes associated with this relationship, and explore the governance mechanisms that underpin it. The systematic review methodology ensures rigor, transparency, and replicability, thereby contributing to the development of evidence-based insights and future research directions (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

This study seeks to advance the understanding of how sustainable leadership translates into sustainable entrepreneurship within organizational and institutional contexts. By integrating perspectives from leadership theory, entrepreneurship research, and sustainability studies, the paper contributes to a more holistic understanding of the leadership entrepreneurship nexus. Ultimately, the findings are expected to provide valuable implications for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to foster sustainable business practices and achieve long term socio environmental impact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing urgency of global environmental and social challenges has positioned sustainable leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship as critical constructs in contemporary management research, particularly in the context of achieving long term

organizational and societal value creation (Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024; Schaltegger et al., 2018). Sustainable leadership is broadly defined as a leadership approach that integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives into strategic decision making processes, thereby fostering resilience and long-term performance (Avery, 2005; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Concurrently, sustainable entrepreneurship focuses on the identification and exploitation of opportunities that contribute to sustainable development by addressing environmental degradation and social inequality (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Cohen & Winn, 2007). The intersection of these two domains has gained increasing scholarly attention, highlighting the transformation from leadership driven sustainability initiatives to entrepreneurial action (Pauceanu et al., 2021; Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024).

A key stream of literature emphasizes the drivers of sustainable leadership and entrepreneurship, particularly the role of individual cognition, values, and competencies in shaping sustainability oriented behaviors (Abdelnaeim & El-Bassiouny, 2021; Ploum et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial cognition has been found to significantly influence sustainability orientation, especially in emerging markets where institutional voids require proactive decision making and innovation (Abdelnaeim & El-Bassiouny, 2021). Similarly, leadership competencies such as systems thinking, ethical orientation, and stakeholder engagement are essential in fostering sustainable practices within organizations (Ferdig, 2007; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022). Empirical studies further indicate that environmentally oriented CEOs and leadership commitment positively affect firm growth and sustainability outcomes, particularly in small and medium sized enterprises (Andersén et al., 2020; Fatoki, 2021).

Another critical driver lies in organizational and ecosystem level factors, including innovation ecosystems, institutional support, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms (Aliabadi et al., 2022; Bakry et al., 2022). Sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems, characterized by supportive policies, access to finance, and collaborative networks, play a pivotal role in facilitating sustainable venture creation and scaling (Cohen, 2006; Bischoff, 2021). Furthermore, stakeholder engagement has been identified as a central mechanism for aligning organizational strategies with sustainability goals, enabling co creation of value across multiple actors (Anbarasan & Sushil, 2018; Peterlin et al., 2015). The role of universities and knowledge institutions is also significant, as they contribute

to entrepreneurial competencies and innovation through education and research collaborations (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Wagner et al., 2021).

The literature also highlights the importance of market and institutional conditions as drivers of sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly in overcoming barriers such as resource constraints, regulatory challenges, and market imperfections (Pinkse & Groot, 2015; Hoogendoorn et al., 2019). Market failures, including externalities and information asymmetries, create opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurs to introduce innovative solutions that address environmental and social issues (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Sarma & Deshpande, 2022). Additionally, institutional entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in shaping regulatory frameworks and influencing policy changes that support sustainability transitions (Gasbarro et al., 2017; Westman et al., 2023).

In terms of outcomes, sustainable leadership and entrepreneurship have been linked to enhanced organizational performance, innovation, and competitive advantage (Burawat, 2019; Dai et al., 2022). Sustainable leadership practices contribute to improved environmental performance, employee engagement, and knowledge sharing, which in turn drive innovation and organizational resilience (Iqbal et al., 2022; Khalil et al., 2021). Moreover, sustainable entrepreneurship fosters green innovation and business model transformation, enabling firms to create value while reducing environmental impact (Schaltegger et al., 2016; Frare & Beuren, 2022). Empirical evidence also suggests that sustainable entrepreneurial orientation positively influences business performance through the development of innovative capabilities and market responsiveness (Criado-Gomis et al., 2018; Han & Niu, 2022).

At the societal level, sustainable entrepreneurship contributes to broader sustainability outcomes, including environmental protection, social inclusion, and economic development (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Case studies from developing and climate vulnerable regions demonstrate that sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives can enhance community resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of environmental challenges (Gray et al., 2014; Arslan et al., 2023). Furthermore, the integration of digital technologies and innovation ecosystems has amplified the impact of sustainable entrepreneurship, enabling scalable and efficient solutions to sustainability challenges (Almansour, 2022; Leitão et al., 2023).

The governance mechanisms underpinning the transition from sustainable leadership to sustainable entrepreneurship are equally critical in shaping outcomes and ensuring accountability (Bendell et al., 2017; Liao, 2022). Governance structures that promote transparency, stakeholder participation, and ethical decision making are essential for aligning organizational practices with sustainability objectives (Nunes & de Hoyos Guevara, 2018; Urbaniec et al., 2022). Corporate governance frameworks that integrate sustainability principles into strategic decision making have been shown to enhance firm performance and stakeholder trust (Valdez-Juárez et al., 2021; Jerónimo Silvestre et al., 2018).

Moreover, collaborative governance involving public private partnerships and multi stakeholder engagement has emerged as a key mechanism for addressing complex sustainability challenges (Park & Chung, 2021; Gasbarro et al., 2018). Such governance approaches facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective action, thereby enabling systemic change and sustainable development (Carayannis et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2023). The role of institutional support and policy frameworks is also crucial in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly through incentives, regulations, and capacity-building initiatives (Yakubu et al., 2022; Muhammad Muneeb et al., 2020).

Finally, the methodological foundation of this systematic literature review is grounded in established frameworks such as PRISMA and evidence based management approaches, ensuring rigor and transparency in the synthesis process (Moher et al., 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003). Bibliometric and systematic review techniques have been widely used to map the evolution of sustainable leadership and entrepreneurship research, identify key themes, and propose future research agendas (Donthu et al., 2021; Anand et al., 2021). These methodological approaches enable a comprehensive understanding of the field, highlighting emerging trends such as digital transformation, circular economy, and social innovation in sustainability research (Moya-Clemente et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2020).

The literature demonstrates that the transition from sustainable leadership to sustainable entrepreneurship is driven by a complex interplay of individual, organizational, and institutional factors, leading to diverse outcomes at both organizational and societal levels. Governance mechanisms play a critical role in mediating this transition, ensuring that sustainability objectives are effectively integrated

into entrepreneurial practices and strategic decision-making processes. This synthesis provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the evolving landscape of sustainability oriented leadership and entrepreneurship, while also identifying key gaps and opportunities for future research.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach to examine the transition from leadership to entrepreneurship in sustainability, with a focus on identifying key drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms. A systematic literature review is particularly appropriate for synthesizing fragmented knowledge across interdisciplinary domains and developing integrative theoretical insights (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). This method enables a transparent, replicable, and rigorous process for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting relevant research evidence (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

The review follows established guidelines for systematic reviews in management and sustainability research, particularly the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, which ensures methodological transparency and minimizes bias in study selection (Moher et al., 2009). Additionally, the study adopts the structured review process proposed by Snyder (2019), which emphasizes planning, conducting, and reporting phases to ensure analytical rigor.

The literature search was conducted using multiple reputable academic databases, to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). Keywords were carefully developed based on the research objectives and included combinations of terms such as “sustainable leadership,” “sustainability entrepreneurship,” “green entrepreneurship,” “corporate sustainability,” “governance mechanisms,” and “sustainability performance.” Boolean operators (and, or) were applied to refine the search and enhance the relevance of retrieved articles.

The search was limited to articles published in English between 2000 and 2025, reflecting the growing academic interest in sustainability and entrepreneurial transformation during this period (Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010). Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure the reliability and academic rigor of the sources (Podsakoff et al., 2005).

To ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Studies were included if they: (1) addressed leadership in sustainability contexts, (2) examined entrepreneurial activities related to sustainability, (3) discussed governance mechanisms influencing sustainability initiatives, and (4) provided empirical or conceptual insights into drivers and outcomes. Conversely, studies were excluded if they: (1) were not peer-reviewed, (2) focused on unrelated domains such as purely technical environmental studies without organizational context, or (3) lacked sufficient methodological transparency.

The application of these criteria aligns with best practices in systematic reviews, which emphasize the importance of clearly defined selection parameters to enhance validity and replicability (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

The study selection process followed a multi stage screening procedure. First, duplicate records were removed. Second, titles and abstracts were screened to assess relevance to the research objectives. Third, full text articles were evaluated against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This stepwise approach helps reduce selection bias and ensures that only high-quality and relevant studies are included in the final analysis (Tranfield et al., 2003).

The PRISMA flow diagram was used to document the selection process, providing a transparent overview of the number of studies identified, screened, excluded, and included in the final sample (Moher et al., 2009).

Data from the selected studies were systematically extracted using a standardized data extraction form. Key information included author(s), publication year, research context, methodology, theoretical framework, key findings, and identified drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms. This structured approach ensures consistency and facilitates comparative analysis across studies (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

A thematic coding approach was employed to analyze the data, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to sustainability leadership and entrepreneurship (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both inductive and deductive coding techniques were applied. Deductive coding was guided by existing theoretical frameworks such as institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and resource based view, while inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the data.

The analysis followed a qualitative synthesis approach, integrating findings across studies to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Thematic synthesis was used to categorize findings into three main dimensions: drivers (e.g., institutional pressures, leadership values, innovation capabilities), outcomes (e.g., environmental performance, competitive advantage, social impact), and governance mechanisms (e.g., regulatory frameworks, corporate governance structures, stakeholder engagement).

This approach is consistent with qualitative evidence synthesis methods that aim to generate new theoretical insights by integrating diverse findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Furthermore, cross study comparisons were conducted to identify similarities, differences, and research gaps, contributing to theory development in sustainability and entrepreneurship literature.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the included studies, a quality assessment was conducted based on criteria such as methodological rigor, clarity of research design, data validity, and theoretical contribution. This step is essential in systematic reviews to minimize the influence of low quality studies on the overall findings (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

Studies were not excluded solely based on quality assessment scores; however, the evaluation informed the interpretation of findings and the weighting of evidence in the synthesis process.

The reliability of the review process was enhanced through the use of a transparent and replicable methodology, including clearly defined search strategies, selection criteria, and analytical procedures (Tranfield et al., 2003). Validity was ensured through triangulation of data sources and theoretical perspectives, which strengthens the robustness of the findings (Yin, 2018).

Additionally, the use of multiple databases and systematic screening procedures reduces the risk of publication bias and enhances the comprehensiveness of the review (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020).

As this study is based on secondary data from published literature, it does not involve direct human participants and therefore does not require ethical approval. However, ethical standards were maintained by properly citing all sources and ensuring academic integrity throughout the research process (Resnik, 2018).

RESULTS

This systematic qualitative literature review synthesizes prior scholarly work to identify the key drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms linking leadership to entrepreneurship in sustainability. The findings are organized into three main thematic dimensions: (1) drivers of sustainability-oriented leadership and entrepreneurial transformation, (2) outcomes of sustainability entrepreneurship, and (3) governance mechanisms enabling and constraining this transition.

Drivers of the Transition from Leadership to Sustainability Entrepreneurship. The literature consistently highlights that the transition from traditional leadership to sustainability oriented entrepreneurship is driven by a combination of institutional, organizational, and individual level factors.

At the institutional level, increasing regulatory pressures and stakeholder expectations regarding environmental and social responsibility act as primary catalysts for sustainability oriented entrepreneurial behavior (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). These pressures encourage leaders to move beyond compliance toward proactive opportunity seeking strategies that integrate sustainability into business models (Cohen & Winn, 2007). Furthermore, global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforce the importance of aligning entrepreneurial initiatives with broader societal challenges (Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010).

At the organizational level, internal capabilities such as dynamic capabilities, innovation culture, and resource flexibility significantly influence the ability of leaders to transition into sustainability entrepreneurs (Teece, 2007; Zahra, Sapienza, & Davidsson, 2006). Firms that foster learning oriented cultures and cross functional collaboration are more likely to support entrepreneurial initiatives focused on sustainability (George, McGahan, & Prabhu, 2012). Additionally, access to financial and technological resources enhances the feasibility of sustainability-driven ventures (Dean & McMullen, 2007).

At the individual level, leadership values, ethical orientation, and cognitive framing play a critical role in shaping sustainability entrepreneurship (Pless & Maak, 2011). Transformational and responsible leadership styles are particularly influential, as they emphasize long term value creation, stakeholder engagement, and moral responsibility (Maak & Pless, 2006). Moreover, leaders with strong environmental awareness and pro

social motivations are more likely to identify and exploit sustainability related opportunities (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011).

Outcomes of Sustainability Oriented Entrepreneurship. The review reveals that sustainability entrepreneurship generates multidimensional outcomes, encompassing economic, environmental, and social performance.

From an economic perspective, sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship contributes to competitive advantage through innovation, differentiation, and market expansion (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Firms that integrate sustainability into their core strategies often achieve superior long term financial performance due to enhanced reputation and customer loyalty (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014). Additionally, sustainable innovation opens new market opportunities, particularly in green technologies and circular economy models (Bocken et al., 2014).

Environmental outcomes include reductions in resource consumption, emissions, and waste through eco innovation and sustainable business practices (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Sustainability entrepreneurs play a crucial role in addressing environmental challenges by developing solutions that align economic activities with ecological constraints (Cohen & Winn, 2007).

Social outcomes are also prominent, as sustainability entrepreneurship promotes inclusive growth, community development, and improved stakeholder well being (Hall et al., 2010). Social enterprises and hybrid organizations, in particular, demonstrate the potential to balance profit generation with social impact (Battilana & Lee, 2014). These outcomes highlight the transformative potential of entrepreneurship in advancing sustainable development goals.

Governance Mechanisms in Sustainability Entrepreneurship. Governance mechanisms are critical in shaping the effectiveness and accountability of sustainability oriented entrepreneurship. The literature identifies formal and informal governance structures that influence decision making and performance outcomes.

Formal governance mechanisms include regulatory frameworks, corporate governance structures, and sustainability reporting systems. Strong governance structures enhance transparency and accountability, thereby fostering trust among stakeholders (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2017). Board diversity and the presence of sustainability

committees have also been shown to positively influence sustainability performance and entrepreneurial initiatives (Post, Rahman, & Rubow, 2011).

Informal governance mechanisms, such as organizational culture, leadership norms, and stakeholder engagement practices, are equally important. A culture that emphasizes ethical behavior and sustainability values supports the integration of entrepreneurial initiatives into organizational strategies (Maak & Pless, 2006). Stakeholder engagement, including collaboration with NGOs, governments, and communities, facilitates knowledge exchange and resource mobilization for sustainability entrepreneurship (George et al., 2012).

Moreover, hybrid governance models that combine market based and mission driven approaches are increasingly relevant in sustainability entrepreneurship (Battilana & Lee, 2014). These models enable organizations to balance financial sustainability with social and environmental objectives, although they may also introduce tensions related to competing priorities.

The synthesis of the literature suggests that the transition from leadership to sustainability entrepreneurship is a dynamic and iterative process influenced by multiple interacting factors. Drivers at different levels reinforce each other, creating a conducive environment for sustainability oriented innovation. At the same time, governance mechanisms play a mediating role by aligning entrepreneurial activities with organizational and societal goals.

Importantly, the review highlights the need for leaders to adopt a systems thinking perspective, recognizing the interconnectedness of economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Hall et al., 2010). This perspective enables the identification of opportunities that generate shared value while addressing complex sustainability challenges.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic qualitative literature review highlight that the transition from leadership to sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship is not merely a linear evolution but a multi level, dynamic transformation process shaped by institutional pressures, organizational capabilities, and individual agency (Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). This discussion integrates and critically reflects on

the synthesized results while comparing them with prior empirical and conceptual studies to deepen theoretical and practical insights.

Interplay Between Leadership and Sustainability Entrepreneurship. The review demonstrates that leadership plays a foundational role in enabling sustainability entrepreneurship by shaping vision, values, and strategic direction (Maak & Pless, 2006; Pless & Maak, 2011). This finding aligns with the study of Cohen and Winn (2007), which argues that entrepreneurial opportunities in sustainability arise from market imperfections, requiring visionary leadership to recognize and exploit them. Similarly, Dean and McMullen (2007) emphasize that sustainability entrepreneurship is driven by the ability of leaders to internalize environmental externalities into strategic decision making.

However, the present review extends these studies by highlighting that leadership is not only an antecedent but also evolves into entrepreneurial action through iterative learning and adaptation processes (Teece, 2007). This perspective contrasts with Shepherd and Patzelt (2011), who focus more on opportunity recognition at the individual level, whereas the current synthesis emphasizes organizational and systemic embeddedness in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with Maak and Pless (2006), who conceptualize responsible leadership as a relational and ethical phenomenon. Yet, this review suggests that responsible leadership alone is insufficient without entrepreneurial orientation, thus bridging a gap between ethical leadership and opportunity driven sustainability innovation (George, McGahan, & Prabhu, 2012).

Drivers: Convergence of Institutional, Organizational, and Individual Forces. The results indicate that sustainability entrepreneurship is driven by a convergence of external pressures and internal capabilities, supporting the multi level framework proposed by Zahra, Sapienza, and Davidsson (2006). Institutional pressures such as regulation and stakeholder expectations are consistent with findings from Porter and Kramer (2011), who argue that shared value creation emerges when firms align business strategies with societal needs.

In comparison, Eccles, Ioannou, and Serafeim (2014) provide empirical evidence that firms with strong sustainability commitments outperform others in the long term, reinforcing the argument that institutional drivers translate into economic benefits. The

present review builds on this by showing that these drivers also stimulate entrepreneurial innovation rather than merely improving operational efficiency.

At the organizational level, dynamic capabilities are identified as critical enablers of sustainability entrepreneurship (Teece, 2007). This finding is consistent with Bocken et al. (2014), who highlight the importance of sustainable business model innovation. However, this review adds nuance by emphasizing the role of organizational culture and cross functional integration as mediating factors, which are less explicitly addressed in prior studies.

At the individual level, values, cognition, and ethical orientation are central drivers (Pless & Maak, 2011). This aligns with Shepherd and Patzelt (2011), who stress the importance of pro social motivation in sustainability entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the current findings suggest that individual motivations must be supported by organizational structures to achieve scalable impact, thereby extending the individual centric perspective of earlier research.

Outcomes: Beyond Triple Bottom Line Performance. The review confirms that sustainability entrepreneurship generates economic, environmental, and social outcomes, consistent with the triple bottom line framework (Elkington, 1997). Economic benefits such as competitive advantage and innovation are supported by Porter and Kramer (2011) and Eccles et al. (2014), who demonstrate the financial value of sustainability integration.

In comparison, Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) emphasize that sustainability entrepreneurship contributes to environmental improvements through eco innovation, which is strongly corroborated by the findings of this review. However, the present synthesis extends this perspective by highlighting the systemic impact of sustainability entrepreneurship, including industry transformation and value chain reconfiguration.

Social outcomes, including inclusive growth and community development, are consistent with George et al. (2012), who argue that innovation can address grand societal challenges. Additionally, Battilana and Lee (2014) provide evidence on hybrid organizations balancing social and economic goals. The current review builds on these insights by demonstrating that sustainability entrepreneurship often requires hybrid value creation logics, which may introduce tensions but also foster innovation.

Importantly, the findings suggest that outcomes are not always uniformly positive, as trade offs and unintended consequences may arise. This observation contrasts with the

predominantly optimistic tone of earlier studies, indicating the need for a more critical and balanced understanding of sustainability entrepreneurship.

Governance Mechanisms: Aligning Entrepreneurship with Sustainability Goals. Governance emerges as a critical factor in ensuring that sustainability entrepreneurship delivers intended outcomes. The role of formal governance mechanisms, such as sustainability reporting and board oversight, aligns with Ioannou and Serafeim (2017), who show that mandatory reporting enhances transparency and accountability.

Similarly, Post, Rahman, and Rubow (2011) find that board diversity positively influences environmental performance, which is consistent with this review's findings on governance effectiveness. However, the present study extends these insights by emphasizing the importance of informal governance mechanisms, including organizational culture and stakeholder engagement.

The role of stakeholder engagement is particularly significant, as highlighted by George et al. (2012), who argue that collaboration across sectors is essential for addressing complex sustainability challenges. The current review supports this view while also identifying potential challenges related to conflicting stakeholder interests.

Moreover, the findings highlight the growing importance of hybrid governance models, as discussed by Battilana and Lee (2014). These models enable organizations to balance financial and social objectives but may also create governance tensions. This duality underscores the need for adaptive governance structures capable of managing competing priorities.

A comparison with eight key prior studies reveals both convergence and divergence in the literature. Cohen and Winn (2007) emphasize market imperfections as drivers; this review confirms but extends by incorporating multi level drivers. Dean and McMullen (2007) focus on environmental externalities; this study broadens the scope to include social and governance dimensions. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) highlight individual motivations; the current review integrates organizational and institutional contexts.

Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) stress eco innovation outcomes; this review expands to systemic and social impacts. Porter and Kramer (2011) introduce shared value; the present findings reinforce and link it to entrepreneurship. Eccles et al. (2014) provide evidence on financial performance; this review connects financial outcomes with entrepreneurial processes. Battilana and Lee (2014) discuss hybrid organizations; the

current study emphasizes governance tensions and mechanisms. George et al. (2012) focus on inclusive innovation; this review integrates inclusivity with sustainability entrepreneurship frameworks. This comparative analysis demonstrates that while prior studies provide valuable insights into specific dimensions, the present review offers a holistic and integrative framework that connects leadership, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.

Theoretically, this review contributes to the literature by integrating leadership theory, entrepreneurship theory, and sustainability research into a unified framework (Zahra et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2010). It advances the understanding of sustainability entrepreneurship as a multi level and process oriented phenomenon, rather than a static outcome.

Practically, the findings suggest that organizations should invest in leadership development, foster innovation oriented cultures, and implement robust governance mechanisms to support sustainability entrepreneurship (Maak & Pless, 2006; Teece, 2007). Policymakers should also create enabling environments through regulation and incentives that encourage sustainable innovation (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

The discussion highlights several avenues for future research. First, there is a need for more empirical studies examining the longitudinal dynamics of leadership transformation into entrepreneurship (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). Second, future research should explore the trade offs and tensions inherent in sustainability entrepreneurship, particularly in hybrid organizations (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Third, the role of emerging technologies and digitalization in enabling sustainability entrepreneurship represents a promising area for further investigation (George et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION

This systematic qualitative literature review synthesizes the evolving relationship between leadership and entrepreneurship in advancing sustainability, with a particular focus on identifying key drivers, outcomes, and governance mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that sustainability-oriented leadership plays a foundational role in enabling entrepreneurial initiatives that address environmental and social challenges while simultaneously generating economic value (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007). Leadership styles such as transformational, ethical, and responsible leadership

emerge as critical drivers that shape organizational vision, foster innovation, and embed sustainability into strategic decision making processes (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Pless & Maak, 2011).

The review further highlights that sustainability entrepreneurship is not merely an extension of conventional entrepreneurship but represents a distinct paradigm characterized by opportunity recognition grounded in ecological and social problem solving (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Leaders who demonstrate long term orientation, stakeholder inclusivity, and moral commitment are more likely to catalyze entrepreneurial ventures that integrate sustainability principles into core business models (Freeman, 1984; Criado-Gomis et al., 2017). These drivers are reinforced by organizational capabilities such as learning orientation, dynamic capabilities, and innovation capacity, which collectively support the transition from leadership intent to entrepreneurial action (Teece, 2007; Zahra et al., 2009).

In terms of outcomes, the literature consistently shows that the integration of leadership and entrepreneurship in sustainability leads to multidimensional performance improvements, including enhanced environmental performance, social impact, and long term financial resilience (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Wagner, 2010). Sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives contribute to the creation of shared value, enabling firms to align profitability with societal needs (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Additionally, organizations that adopt sustainability driven entrepreneurial practices tend to achieve stronger reputational advantages, stakeholder trust, and competitive differentiation in increasingly sustainability conscious markets (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Hörisch et al., 2014).

Governance mechanisms play a crucial mediating role in translating leadership vision into sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes. The review identifies formal governance structures, such as sustainability reporting systems, environmental management controls, and board level oversight, as essential tools for ensuring accountability and strategic alignment (Eccles et al., 2014; Arjaliès & Mundy, 2013). Informal governance mechanisms, including organizational culture, ethical norms, and stakeholder engagement practices, further reinforce sustainability-oriented behaviors and entrepreneurial initiatives (Aguilera et al., 2007; Hahn et al., 2015). The interplay between

formal and informal governance mechanisms enhances organizational capacity to manage trade offs, mitigate risks, and sustain long term value creation.

Moreover, the findings suggest that external institutional pressures, such as regulatory frameworks, market expectations, and societal norms, significantly influence the relationship between leadership and sustainability entrepreneurship (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Organizations operating in environments with strong institutional support for sustainability are more likely to adopt proactive leadership approaches and entrepreneurial strategies that prioritize sustainable development goals. Conversely, weak institutional environments may constrain the effectiveness of leadership initiatives and limit entrepreneurial engagement in sustainability.

Overall, this review contributes to the literature by offering an integrated framework that connects leadership, entrepreneurship, and governance within the sustainability domain. It underscores the importance of aligning individual, organizational, and institutional factors to achieve sustainable outcomes. The synthesis also highlights that successful sustainability transformation requires not only visionary leadership but also robust governance systems and entrepreneurial capabilities that can operationalize sustainability objectives into tangible actions.

LIMITATION

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the review relies on secondary data derived from existing literature, which may introduce publication bias, as studies with significant or positive findings are more likely to be published than those with null or negative results (Tranfield et al., 2003). This limitation may affect the comprehensiveness and balance of the synthesized findings.

Second, the scope of the review is constrained by the selection of databases, keywords, and inclusion criteria, which may have excluded relevant studies published in non-indexed journals, non English languages, or emerging research outlets (Snyder, 2019). As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives and contexts in the global sustainability literature.

Third, the qualitative nature of the systematic literature review limits the ability to establish causal relationships between leadership, entrepreneurship, and sustainability

outcomes. While the study identifies patterns and associations, it does not provide empirical validation through quantitative analysis or experimental design (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Future research could address this limitation by employing mixed method or quantitative approaches to test the proposed relationships.

Fourth, the heterogeneity of the included studies in terms of theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and contextual settings presents challenges for synthesis and comparison. Differences in definitions of sustainability, leadership styles, and entrepreneurial practices may lead to inconsistencies in interpretation and limit the generalizability of the findings (Hahn et al., 2015).

Fifth, the review does not fully account for industry specific dynamics and contextual variations, such as differences between developed and developing economies, which may influence the applicability of the findings. Sustainability challenges and opportunities vary significantly across sectors and regions, and future studies should explore these contextual nuances in greater depth (Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010).

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of sustainability and entrepreneurship research means that new developments, technologies, and policy frameworks may not be fully reflected in the reviewed literature. Emerging trends such as digital sustainability, circular economy models, and ESG integration continue to reshape the field, highlighting the need for ongoing research and updated reviews (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017).

While this systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the intersection between leadership and entrepreneurship in sustainability, its limitations point to important avenues for future research. Addressing these limitations will enhance the robustness, relevance, and practical applicability of future studies, ultimately contributing to more effective strategies for achieving sustainable development through leadership driven entrepreneurship.

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